PRIVATE EYE

No. 1179
2 March –
15 March 2007
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Inside:
£12bn NHS IT
COCK-UP SPECIAL

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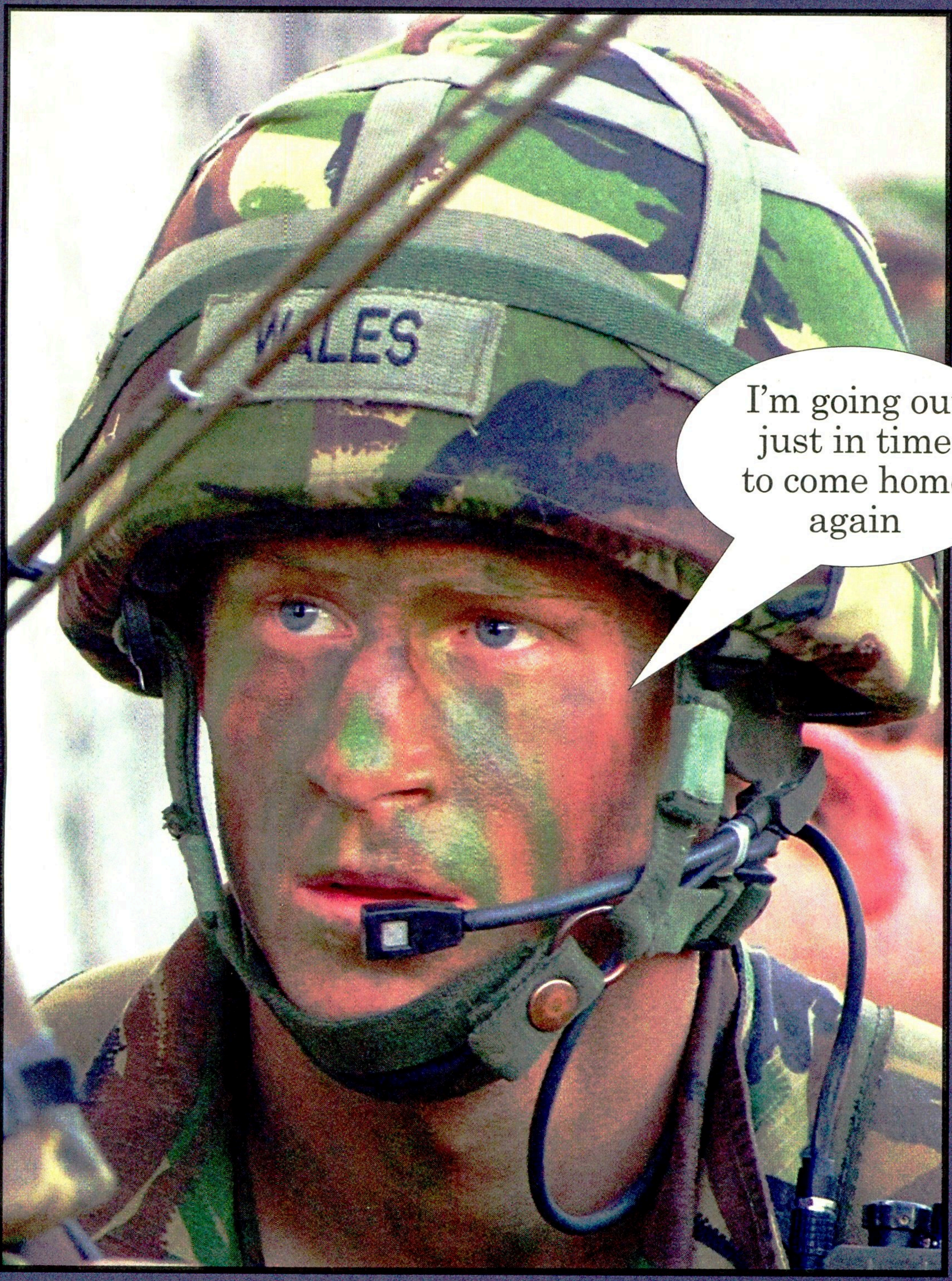

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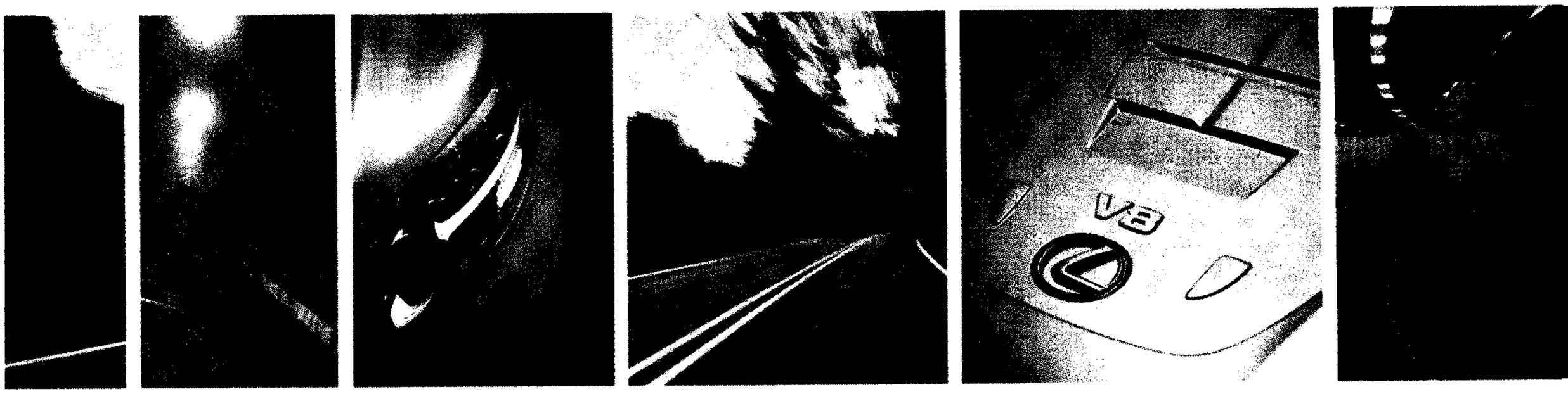

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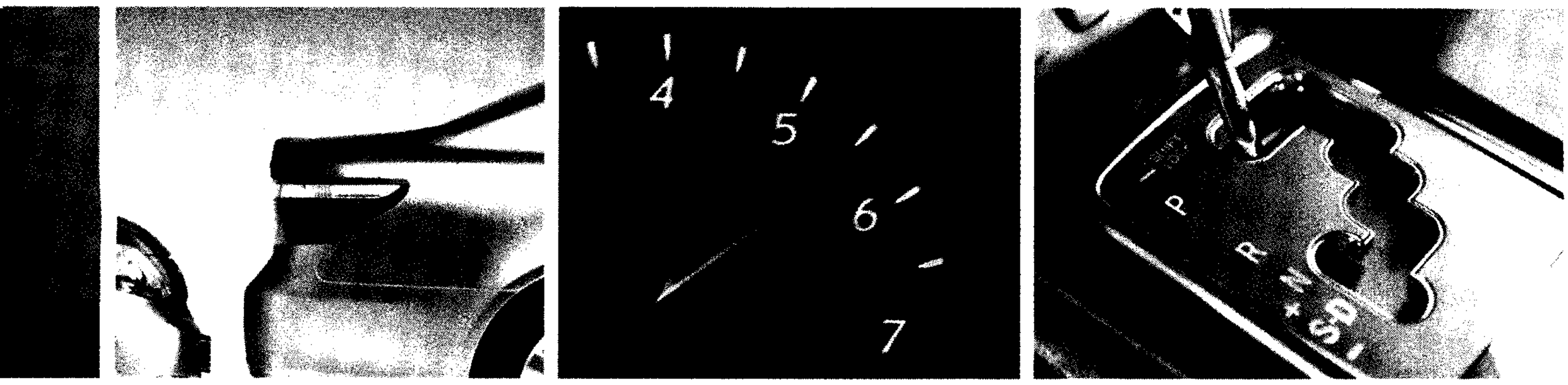

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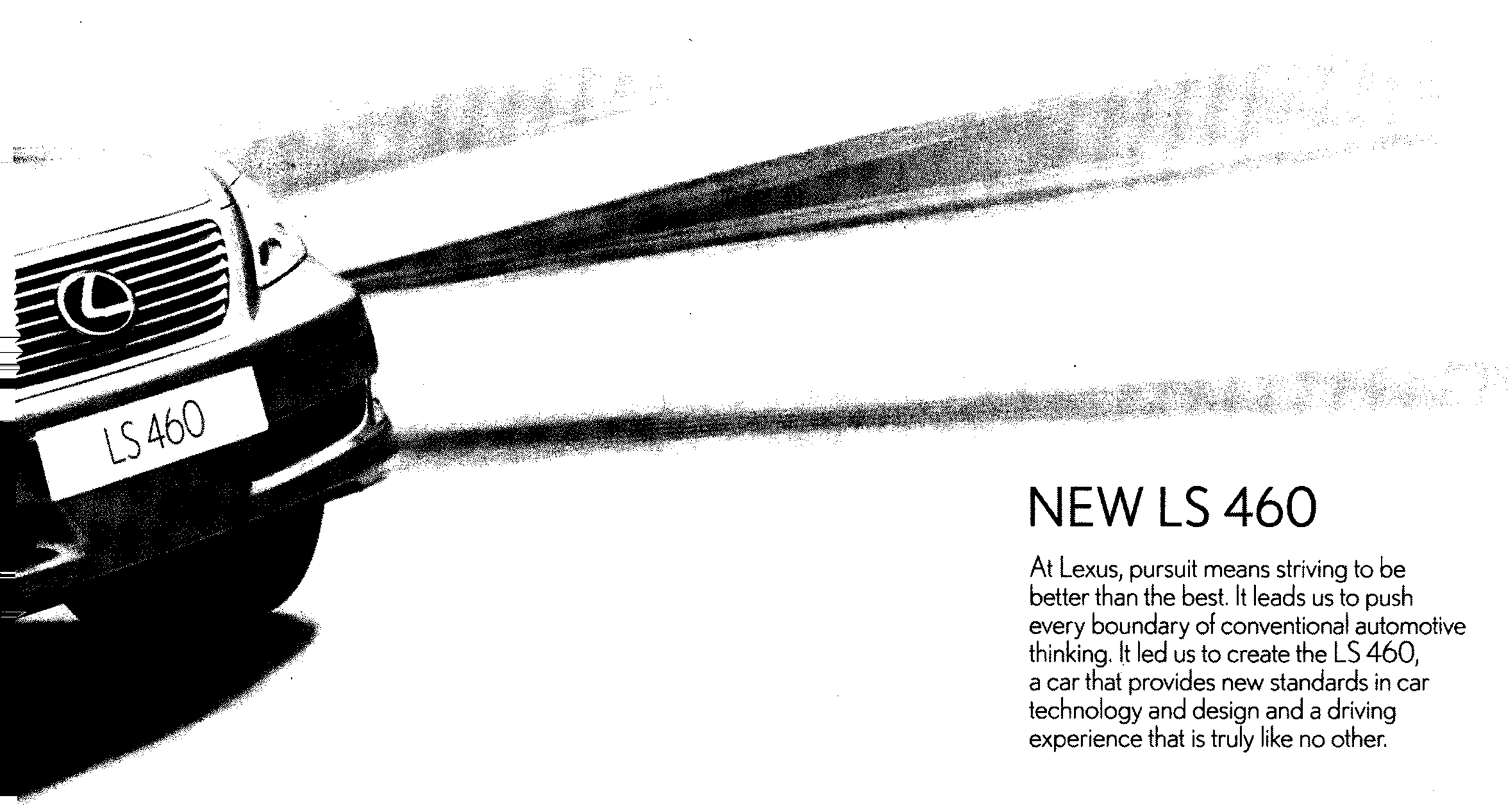

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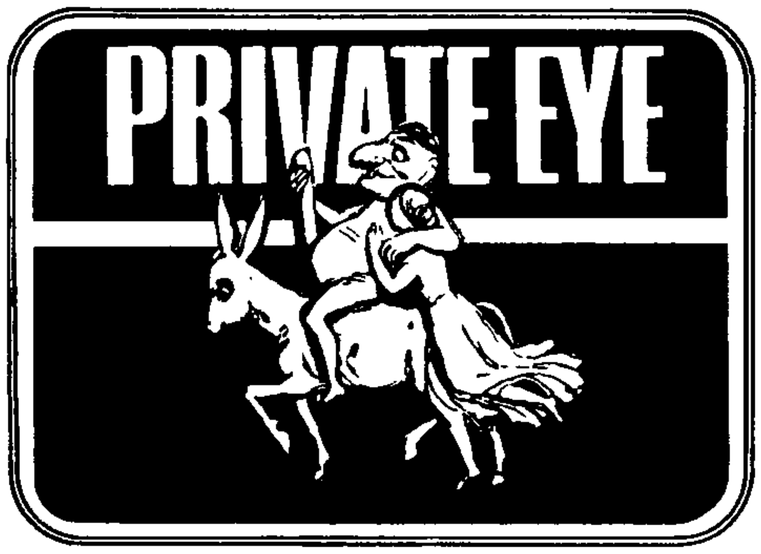

Royal photo shoot-up

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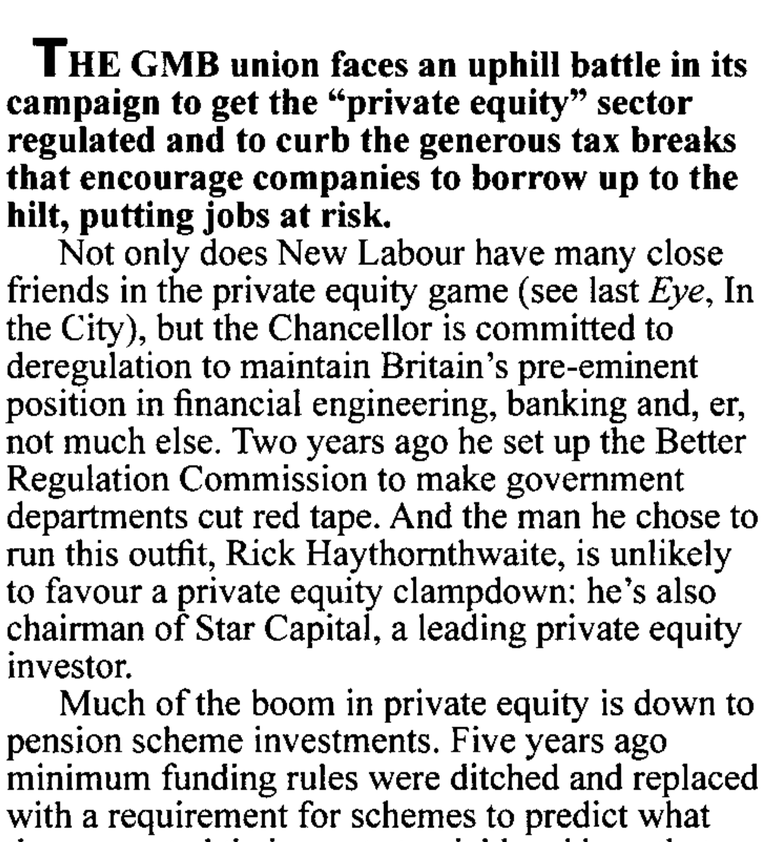
PANIC is gripping the Treasury as a dispute over an arcane accounting rule threatens to damage the Chancellor's economic record.

Gordon has stuck to his sustainable investment rule – that national debt must not exceed 40 percent of national income – with the help of an accounting fiddle on PFI (see *Eye* 1176). But the fiddle is being challenged by the Treasury's semi-autonomous Financial Reporting Advisory Board.

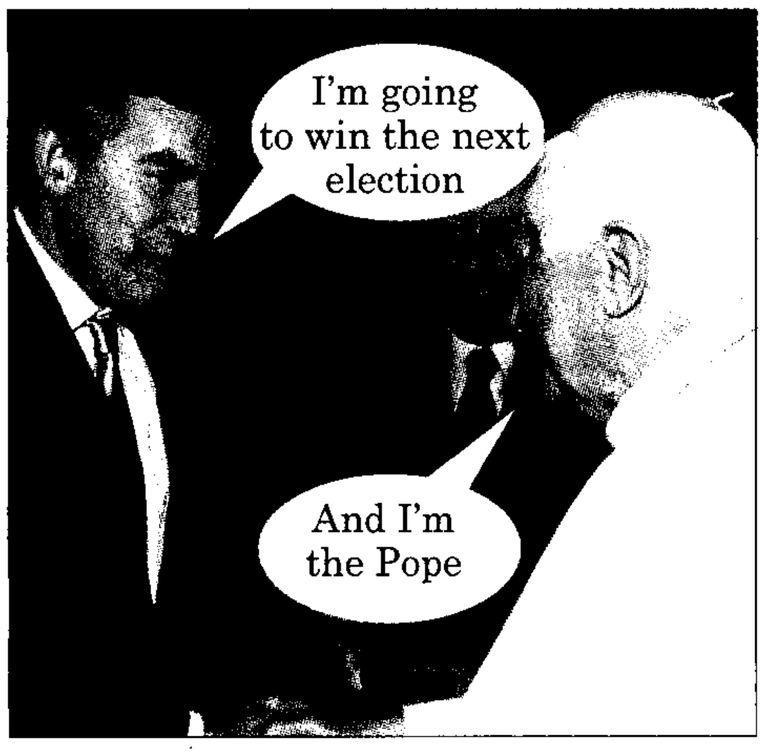
FRAB is concerned at the ease with which PFI deals can be shifted "off balance sheet" under Technical Note 1 – a Treasury guidance published between 1997 and 1999, when Brown's then Paymaster General Geoffrey Robinson was in charge. What really irks FRAB is how public investments disappear from both public and private sector balance sheets – a trick exposed in Paul Foot's special PFI report (*Eye* 1102) in 2004.

Building magazine has discovered that FRAB is set to recommend scrapping Technical Note 1, potentially putting future PFI deals on the government's books – and exposing the fact that most of the £35bn of projects now off balance sheet should have been "on".

A showdown is scheduled between FRAB and the Treasury for next month. Gordon's officials are reported to be desperate for a deal that won't deliver the ultimate humiliation for their boss – at least not until he's safely in the top job.



"They're sending us to South London"



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ABC

THE GMB union faces an uphill battle in its campaign to get the "private equity" sector regulated and to curb the generous tax breaks that encourage companies to borrow up to the hilt, putting jobs at risk.

Not only does New Labour have many close friends in the private equity game (see last *Eye*, In the City), but the Chancellor is committed to deregulation to maintain Britain's pre-eminent position in financial engineering, banking and, er, not much else. Two years ago he set up the Better Regulation Commission to make government departments cut red tape. And the man he chose to run this outfit, Rick Haythornthwaite, is unlikely to favour a private equity clampdown: he's also chairman of Star Capital, a leading private equity investor.

Much of the boom in private equity is down to pension scheme investments. Five years ago minimum funding rules were ditched and replaced with a requirement for schemes to predict what they expected their assets to yield and how that would meet their pension bills. Big returns can be claimed for private equity investments and schemes have been keen to pour in members' cash. (Ironically, the man who recommended this change in a review of investment for the Chancellor, Paul Myners, last week spoke out against the growing dangers of private equity.)

The new Pensions Regulator, meanwhile, is throwing fuel on the fire by allowing struggling pension funds to run deficits in the expectation that they'll out-perform the stock market by investing heavily in private equity. The evidence is that they won't, however, as private equity's high leverage means it's more prone to disaster when the going gets rough. Over time, returns are no better than ordinary stocks. So the pension funds will still have to find more cash or be bailed out by the industry-funded Pension Protection Fund. But at least the all-important objective – putting the problem off to another day – is achieved.

JUSTIFYING ever-increasing profits (up 35 percent this time), Barclays chief executive John Varley went on BBC radio last week to claim that everybody shares in his bank's success.

Not least among the winners, he explained, are the country's young and sick, through Barclays' "£2bn" tax payment – enough to build countless schools and hospitals. In fact less than half of this goes in tax paid to the UK government. But never mind that; does Varley's rousing commitment to the greater good mean his bank's legendary tax-avoiding exploits are over?

When the *Eye* put this question to a spokesman, he said it was "an intellectual discussion for another day" – certainly not the day his boss had taken to the airwaves to boast about the bank's contribution to society. The reply will prompt wry smiles at HM Revenue & Customs, where a special project bringing together the department's finest tax experts and lawyers has been set up to unravel the Byzantine Barclays scams that cost the Exchequer hundreds of millions every year. A couple exposed by the *Eye* involve the routing of insurance premium income offshore and the purchase of that essential piece of banking kit, a gas pipeline, just to generate tax allowances. Big scams like this one, and many more that enable the bank's customers to dodge their tax bills, come out of the Barclays Capital unit, which reported profits up 55 percent to £2.2bn – and that's after multi-million pound bonuses have been paid to the brains behind the scheming.

ACCORDING to David Cameron, the breakdown of family life led to the recent shootings in south London. "I want to see couples stay together, and we know that the best way to ensure this is to support marriage."

No doubt his chief speechwriter, Douglas Smith, would agree. Until a couple of years ago he ran Fever Parties, an agency organising "five-star" orgies for swingers, at which as many as 50 couples at a time would merrily have sex with complete strangers.

This is the same Dougie Smith who – clad in military fatigues – was a leading stormtrooper of the loony-right faction that dominated the Federation of Conservative Students in the 1980s. Elected as FCS vice-chairman in 1983, he was forced to resign shortly afterwards when it transpired that, despite claiming to be a student at Napier College, he was nothing of the sort.

In April 1990 he was arrested by Hammersmith police after allegedly threatening to kill a fellow FCS member, Toby Baxendale, who had won the affections of Smith's ex-girlfriend. After a night in the cells, however, he was released. He then found employment at the shadowy Committee for a Free Britain, run by right-wing tycoon and Lord Lucan lookalike David Hart.

In the 1997 general election Dougie campaigned energetically for Sir Jammy Fishpaste's Referendum Party, where he became great chums with Sir Jammy's son Zac Goldsmith – whom he has since brought into Dave's big tent.

The language of Smith's speeches for Cameron is quite a contrast to his 1985 FCS publication *Smash the Red Menace*, which advised Tories how to disrupt NUS conferences. "Always be provocative… e.g. 'You red fascist scum.' A true master should be able to provoke self-righteous Leftists into a quarter of an hour orgy of chaos… Think about staging a mock fight at the side of the stage."

If the Cameroons fail to make the necessary breakthrough with their caring 'n' sharing approach, perhaps they should keep this in reserve as Plan B.

NEWS

MURDERERS not listed on the police computer, inmates walking out of open jails, suspect "terrorists" going missing... No one could say the Home Office has nothing to be getting on with.

But instead of finding out how these cock-ups occurred, John Reid's department has been hunting the probation officer "moles" who may have provided anonymised case histories to illustrate the problems.

The Home Office is using emails to track down anyone who passed on details of absconders (or indeed any material that might embarrass Mr Reid) to Napo, the probation officers' union. Whistleblowers could face disciplinary action.

Unluckily for Mr Reid, probation officers refuse to be bullied into silence. Hence the *Eye* can report that jail overcrowding has worsened as inmates in the south are refused parole for not having completed programmes designed to deal with their offending behaviour. And the reason they haven't completed the courses? Because some of the jails are too hard-pressed to run them. Brilliant!

In the north-west, meanwhile, offenders have taken a different stance: refusing to carry out all their community penalties, arguing they cannot be punished for refusing because the jails are too full to take them...

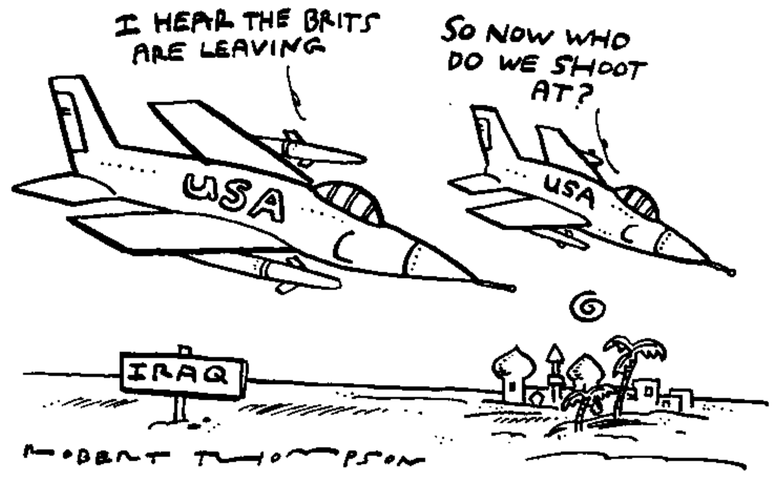
LABOUR deputy leadership candidate Peter Hain has wooed the left of his party with recent attacks on extreme wealth, in particular excessive bonus payments to high earners.

"That sort of thing creates a society where you do start getting envy being promoted and a sense of real antagonism and that breeds all sorts of socially undesirable behaviour," he told the *Sunday Telegraph*.

The same Peter Hain declares in his latest entry on the register of MPs' interests that "I occasionally accept hospitality from SKY Sports to attend Chelsea Football Club for some of Chelsea's home matches". The next time he's being lavishly entertained at Stamford Bridge courtesy of SKY, whose chief executive James Murdoch trousered a £1.65m bonus last year to go with his £1m salary and pension contributions, he'll have the perfect opportunity to denounce fat cats and the socially undesirable behaviour they breed.

IN JANUARY's debate on Iraq, Margaret Beckett confounded critics by announcing that what really matters is "the opinion of the people of Basra", and quoted a poll to MPs as evidence.

According to Beckett, a December 2006 poll showed that 92 percent of people in Basra "felt more secure in their own neighbourhoods", while



50 percent "felt that the police service was effective", and other such encouraging findings.

Private Eye asked the Foreign Office about the origin of these poll results. It responded after a couple of weeks that the polling was carried out on behalf of the Ministry of Defence but that for security reasons every other detail would remain secret. The ministry would not say who carried out the polls, how many were polled, what sampling method was used, which techniques were applied to deal with potential bias, what questions were asked, what the full range of responses were, or how the responses broke down by region, sex, age, religion or any other variable. They suggested that revealing any of these details would endanger lives.

Even though the Foreign Secretary was using these polls to try and influence a Parliamentary debate, the Foreign Office was adamant that nothing more about them could be revealed.

Street of Shame

LAST Saturday, while every other paper led with the high-speed train crash in the Lake District, the *Daily Express* loyally relegated the story to page 4. This left the front page – and pages 2 and 3 – clear for a far bigger story: Richard "Dirty" Desmond has met the Queen!

There was a photo to prove it, and a jubilant headline: "The Queen gives royal seal of approval to the *Daily Express* proprietor's £15m eye hospital." The "hospital" in question is a new eye centre at Moorfields, to which Desmond donated £2.5m. Generous indeed, though not quite as huge a donation as the headline implied.

Alas, under the terms of its non-aggression pact with the *Express*, the *Daily Mail* was unable to run a piece deploring the "royal seal of approval" for Dirty Des. But two days later it did run a two-page spread about Jacqueline Gold, boss of Ann Summers. "THE QUEEN OF SLEAZE," it thundered. "Her business was built on her family's £500m trade in hardcore porn. So why was this woman rubbing shoulders with the Queen?" Geddit!?

A DAYTIME TV programme flagrantly ripping off its viewers by encouraging viewers to waste money on purposeless phone-ins – surely the ideal story for the paper that pronounces itself as "fighting for your rights"?

Curiously, while every other newspaper went big on the phone-line scandal that led to Channel 4 promising to refund viewers of the *Richard & Judy* show, the *Daily Express* ran not a word on the scandal.

Was editor Peter "Mentally" Hill suffering an attack of conscience over his daily 25p-a-go "phone polls", which last week featured such taxing philosophical conundrums as "Should illegal immigrants be free to roam the streets of Britain?", "Should Muslims tell us how to run our schools?", and "Has Britain gone to the dogs?". Or was he just keen not to offend his only remaining star columnists, Richard Madeley and Judy Finnigan?

THE *Daily Express* has alerted its few remaining readers to a new danger, utterly terrifying in its severity.

The problem? Killer travelators are apparently on the rise. On 12 February, under the headline, "Alert as moving walkways cause spate of injuries", the piece mentioned that "there were also reports of passengers stumbling at airports".

And therein lies the inevitable back story. The aforementioned reports came from Richard Desmond's wife, who fell over last week on a travelator at Heathrow Airport. Hacks at the paper are still debating whether this exclusive was more spurious than the report they penned two years ago into a plague of wasps, after Dirty Des's friend was stung by one.

KEVIN MAGUIRE of the *Daily Mirror* was in full cry last week. "To call the casino capitalists in voracious private equity groups 'locusts' is an insult to large grasshoppers," he raged. "The asset-strippers... are arguably more ruthless than the insects."

Maguire singled out the Permira group but he could have been equally hard on firms such as Harris Associates, Tweedy Browne and Capital Group, all of which run aggressive private equity divisions. On the other hand, they are also some of the largest shareholders in Trinity Mirror, Maguire's employer, so he had the good sense to omit them from the list of shame.

"JUST two hours to buy a deadly weapon," thundered the *Daily Mail* on 16 February over the news that hack Christian Gysin had been offered "a classic 9mm Beretta-style automatic pistol" after a few phone calls.

"Last night a weapons expert said the gun offered to the *Daily Mail* appeared to be a copy of the 1911A1 pistol which has been used by the U.S. Army for decades," Gysin reported. "'Many of these types of weapons can be made to fire live rounds,' said David Dyson."

Mysteriously, the rest of the quote Dyson gave to the paper failed to appear. It concluded: "But not that one."

His full opinion of the weapon in question, as outlined to the Eye? "It's a toy, it couldn't be more obvious. You just have to look at it. You don't need to mess around with gangsters to get hold of one of those – you could just walk into a toy shop and buy one."

A SKEWED idea of what taxpayers' cash should fund continues to thwart 125,000 people who lost pensions in what the Parliamentary Ombudsman described as "maladministration".

The government instantly dismissed her findings and the Prime Minister misleadingly claimed that the cost of compensation, at £15bn, was prohibitive (see *Eye* 1161). In fact this was the total cash cost over 50 years; for all other pension matters the government uses annual costs. At today's prices, this would be around £100m a year.

Last week the High Court ruled that the government's out-of-hand dismissal of the Ombudsman's findings was unlawful. So will the victims now get their money?

Don't be silly. Challenged on the issue by David Cameron at Prime Minister's Questions, Blair once again claimed the bill was unaffordable – unlike, say, the £1bn-a-year cost to taxpayers of the Iraq war (10 times as much) or the £3bn-a-year paid to consultants (30 times as much) or the £20bn-a-year public sector pensions bill (200 times as much).

"KING OF SIN" roared an approving *News of the World* on 11 February, over an exclusive interview with Joe Francis, the "horny porn man who has bedded Paris Hilton, Kimberly Stewart, Lindsay Lohan AND Tara Reid".

"Joe – founder of soft porn giants Mantra films, boasts 'I sure am a lucky guy to have had them all'," noted hackette Georgina Dickinson. "Is he the luckiest bloke in the world ... or just the MUCKIEST?"

Well, he's certainly among the muckier. Francis is currently on probation after pleading guilty to failing to keep proper documentation of the ages of young women appearing in his series of *Girls Gone Wild* videos, which resulted in "footage of at least two minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct being distributed".

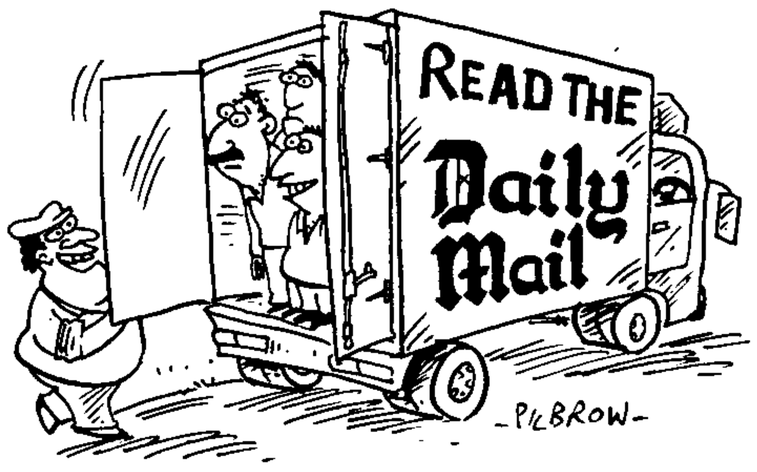
Phwoar! Just the role model for the paedo-hating, crime-crusading, name'n'shame'm *News of the World!*

THE serialisation of Coleen McLoughlin's autobiography brought out the best traditions of Fleet Street.

The *Mirror*, which had the rights to the "memoirs" of the 20-year-old girlfriend of spud-faced nipper Wayne Rooney, naturally went big with its "world exclusive". It was particularly keen to dwell on Coleen's take on the WAGs and the press attention that accompanied them during last year's World Cup: "Everyone went over the top, detailing how much we were spending, how much we were drinking, the fashion wars. They said there were divides, a competition to see how many column inches we could get. But there were never any problems between the girls."

McLoughlin might have had in mind a breathless newspaper report from last June: "It is being dubbed the war of the WAGs and the action is almost as gripping as the players' actions on the pitch. England's glamorous wives and girlfriends are locked in a desperate battle for attention – and this game is definitely going to extra time. From their designer outfits to competitive shopping bouts, the girls' attempts at outdoing each other seem to know no bounds." It went on to quote an insider who claimed that "the WAGs are all exhibitionists who know they're on camera. At first it was all nicey-nice but then their characters start to show. The competitiveness and bitching is growing ever-more intense." Needless to say, the paper in question was the *Mirror*.

The *Sun*, which lost out in the bidding war, retaliated with a spoiler operation and ran extracts from a hastily assembled biography by Sue Eviston published by cut-and-paste specialist John "Flakey" Blake. These were almost as dull as the *Mirror*'s version. The only mildly interesting passage in the book describes Coleen and her family raging against newspapers which revelled in Rooney's exposure as a regular visitor to a brothel, and one paper in particular which falsely alleged that he had hit Coleen in a nightclub. But there's no mention of this in the serialisation – possibly because the offending rag was the *Sun*.



"They'll never think of looking for illegal immigrants in here"

HOW SCOOPS WORK

"Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, is to force through a major refurbishment of Oxford Street ... [including] a new international convention centre." – *Times*, 29 September 2005.

"Mayor Ken Livingstone wants to see an international convention centre at Oxford Street's eastern end." – *Estates Gazette*, 4 March 2006.

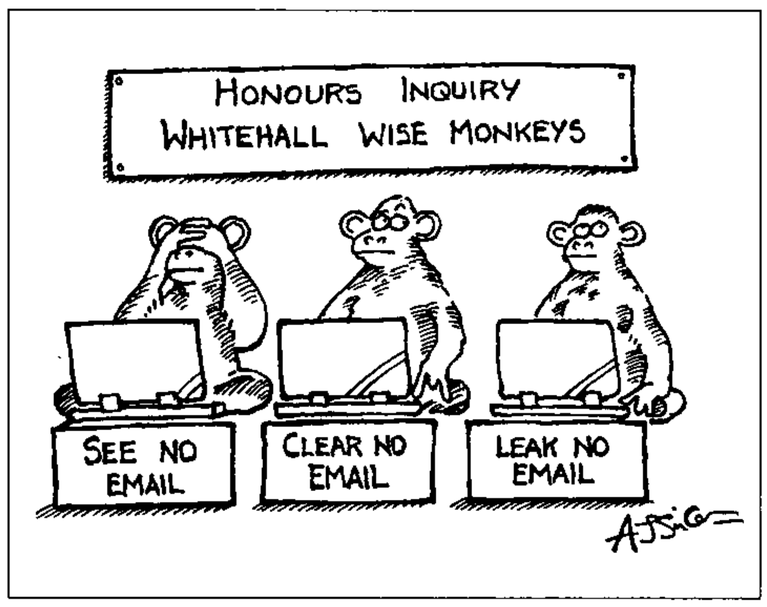
"The Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, has thrown his weight behind a plan to build an International Convention Centre (ICC) ... at the eastern end of Oxford Street." – *Meetings & Incentive Travel*, January 2007.

"Revealed: Secret Plan for West End Convention Centre. Secret plans by London mayor Ken Livingstone to create central London's first purpose-built international convention centre (ICC) have been uncovered by the *Observer*." – *Observer*, 25 February 2007.

IN HIS *Independent* media column, Matthew Norman pays tribute to "that splendid professional Yorkshireman Michael Henderson", whose Saturday columns in the *Telegraph* are "a perpetual delight".

Shome mishtake, shurley? Although Norman is a contributing editor of the *Spectator*, he seems not to read the magazine with which he enjoys such a close association. Had he done so, he would have spotted a long correspondence last autumn between Michael "Hendo" Henderson and Paul Johnson about the county of Lancashire, from which both of them proudly hail.

And if Norman is such an attentive student of Hendo's *Telegraph* columns, he surely noticed one a couple of weeks ago headlined: "A Mancunian Ashamed of Manchester". A tiny clue there, perhaps?



THAT spring chicken of Fleet Street Peter Wilby wrote disdainfully in his *Guardian* column of how the *Daily Telegraph* used to employ doddery arts critics in the 1980s whose average age was 72.

But let us pause for a moment. The *Guardian* group at present employs cinema critic Philip French, 73, theatre critic Michael Billington, 67, and television critic Nancy Banks-Smith, whose age is not disclosed but is thought to be the far side of 80.

In any case, what is so dreadful about employing elderly critics? There's always a chance that older hacks might know a bit more than their younger colleagues – as Wilby, 63, should appreciate.

THE passing of theatre critic Sheridan Morley posed a delicate problem for several media outlets – how to commemorate a man so many of them had so recently sacked?

The *New Statesman*, which ousted him in favour of that-well known theatrical figure Michael Portillo in 2003, ignored his demise entirely. The *Spectator* noted that "Sheridan was a good friend of the *Spectator*. We will all miss him a lot", without mentioning that he was such a good friend that they dispensed with his regular services in 2001, replacing him with Toby Young. Radio 2 boss Lesley Douglas said he had been "one of the great characters of Radio 2 for nearly two decades," ignoring the fact that those came to an end last year when Morley was relieved of his presenting duties on *Melodies For You* and his job given to professional gardener Alan Titchmarsh.

Most impressive, however, was the *Daily Express,* which shamelessly headlined its piece on Morley's passing "*Daily Express* theatre critic Sheridan Morley dies at 65". "He had been the *Daily Express* theatre critic since 2004 and, though he was always forthright, his style, wit and keen sense of observation bore a gentleness that endeared him to actors and directors alike," noted Marco Giannangeli – ignoring the fact that Morley had been sacked from the paper last December, after editor Peter "Mentally" Hill went "totally ballistic" over his less than enthusiastic appraisal of Andrew Lloyd-Webber's production of *The Sound of Music.* Hill, a big fan of musical theatre, had cleared the whole of page 3 in expectation of a rave review, and soon after Morley refused to alter his opinion, he was informed he was a victim of "a major economy drive which necessitates many redundancies".

"Somebody's out to kill off these conspiracy theories"

THE advent of blogging and "citizen journalism" prompted a number of frenzied predictions, but it is probably fair to say that the image of *Mail on Sunday* columnist Peter "Bonkers" Hitchens hammering on the door of a suburban house while his doppelganger cowered inside in his underpants was not among them.

That, however, was the scenario that unfolded a fortnight ago when the author of *The Abolition of Britain* resolved to challenge a man who has for the past few months been posting abusive messages on websites and running his own blog under the name "Peter Hitchens". "It is claimed in this person's defence that this material is a parody," the real Hitchens complains. "But most of what this person writes is just coarse and he ceaselessly uses lavatory wall language, something any reader of mine knows that I loathe."

Having managed to acquire the home address of "Peter Hitchens" – by "perfectly legitimate means", he assures friends – Peter Hitchens cycled there. "Peter Hitchens" refused to answer the door on grounds he outlined to a fellow blogger: "1, He didn't ring the bell, 2, I was wearing nothing other than my underwear, 3, I thought 'Fucking no way is that Peter Hitchens'" – but having said he "admires his balls" (a compliment Hitchens would no doubt have returned had he been able to see beyond the door) he has agreed from here on in to post his own particular brand of right-wing vitriol under the name "The Hitch". "Oddly enough this is the name Christopher Hitchens is known by," observes the mystery blogger, "but bugger him, I don't like him and if he complains he can get lost". The *Eye* suggests it would be simpler for the real Peter Hitchens to start calling himself "Bonkers" like everyone else does.

P.S. Hitchens may not be the only hack to be a victim of cyber-mischief. The entry on online encyclopedia Wikipedia for *Guardian* journalist Zoe Williams was recently amended, with the insertion of the phrases "highly regarded", "witty articles" and "critically acclaimed". The user who made the revisions? One "Zoewilliams".

THE year "2006 threw up all the usual articles exhorting the death of feminism, proclaiming that the women's movement has made women unhappy and men superfluous", opined Kira Cochrane in the *New Statesman* in January.

"Quite a few of these articles came courtesy of a new controversialist, Nirpal Dhaliwal, a man apparently determined to make feminists wince, but who simply made me laugh and laugh and laugh by appearing on *Newsnight Review* in what looked to be a shockingly ill-advised white satin bomber jacket. Really, Nirpal. Never cool. Not even in the 1980s."

On 19 February the *Staggers* printed the following clarification: "This was a case of mistaken identity. We apologise for this error, and we are happy to make clear that Dhaliwal has never appeared on *Newsnight Review*, nor ever owned such a garment."

Those controversialists. They all look the same, don't they?

Comminications Manager – Qualifications Reform

Skills For Business (Grauniad advert)

HAPPILY for Tony Blair the cost of running his country residence, Chequers, is not included in figures on MPs' expenses. The lavish Buckinghamshire pad is instead overseen by independent trustees, whose accounts are not subject to such garish scrutiny.

However, Tory MP Oliver Heald has secured details of how much was paid from public funds last year to keep Tony and Cherie in the style to which they have become accustomed. The figures show that in 2005/06 the grant from public funds to Chequers was £900,000. This expenditure covered everything from repairing leaky pipes and re-laying driveways to "urgent repairs to estate fencing" (i.e. to keep out the ladies and gentlemen of the press and any gum-booted al-Qaeda operatives).

The cost of the military personnel who act as waiters and valets at Chequers was a further £148,571.

BLAIR
MEMORABILIA
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BRUSSELS SPROUTS

DOCUMENTS obtained by the *Eye* shed further light on the not-very-joined-up way European Union policy is made.

As reported in the last issue, the European Commission refused to release a draft impact assessment that underpinned one of this year's biggest policy announcements – that car-makers would be forced to make engines more fuel efficient to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

The *Eye* has now seen the assessment, prepared by the Commission's environment directorate-general. As well as showing that the policy could result in job cuts (contrary to the Commission's public assurances), the study says that biofuels do not presently offer a realistic route to cutting CO_2 because the technology is not sufficiently developed and the market not large enough.

This directly contradicts assurances from Commission vice-president Günter Verheugen when the policy was announced on 7 February. Biofuels, Verheugen said, would have a "rapid, direct effect" on cutting emissions. This was offered as the main justification for giving Verheugen's friends in the car industry – which has been lobbying hard – easier targets than would otherwise have been expected.

But not to worry, as the Commission has promised a full impact assessment in due course. Clearly, as the policy has already been decided, this will be a cosmetic exercise and should conveniently tidy up the loose ends.

WHAT a shame the Brussels institutions that run the EU don't believe a clean-up should mean a clean-up – and that it should begin at home.

Mandarins are apt to incite club spirit – "esprit européenne" – between the European Commission, the Parliament and other Brussels institutions so as not to rock the boat. And if all else fails they use the passage of time to keep things quiet. Examples include the Edith Cresson case, the Eurostat secret accounts, and Marta Andreasen's findings that the accounting system was unsound.

Now the Committee of the Regions, which brings together officials and dignitaries from all corners of the EU, has come into focus – and not for the first time. Questions were asked recently in the European Parliament over the refusal of a parliamentary committee to hear evidence from the CoR's former internal auditor, Robert McCoy, on alleged fraud and mismanagement involving senior staff dating back to 2002. Danish MEP Jens-Peter Bonde suggested the delegates hear the whistleblower as well as the CoR's top management when deciding whether to clear its accounts. Another delegate, MEP Paul van Buitenen, himself a whistleblower, said that accusations of blame for what went wrong were quite unfairly being placed on McCoy himself.

True to form, the Parliament's budgetary control committee went on lending cosy support to the CoR. It cleared the accounts and heard statements from the CoR's secretary general, Gerhard Stahl, but refused to hear from the former auditor, who years ago found himself on "sick leave" following his disclosures.

EU-phemisms

They'll fit in very well around here

Down on the Farm

ANYONE worried that Defra and Mr Miliband might not be just the chaps to be standing in the front line to protect us all from a pandemic of bird 'flu leaving millions dead might consider the following sequence of events.

1 February: Defra vets are called to Bernard Matthews' concentration camp for turkeys at Holton, where birds are falling down dead at nineteen to the dozen.

2 February: Defra confirms that the cause is bird 'flu, slaps on a "3 kilometre protection zone" and a "10 kilometre surveillance zone" under EU rules, within which all free-range poultry must be kept indoors.

4 February: having confirmed virus as H5N1, Defra begins gassing 160,000 birds, chucking their carcases into trucks to be taken to Staffordshire for incineration. When asked whether it might not be dangerous to cart infected carcases 100 miles under no more protection than plastic sheeting, Defra insists that dead birds cannot spread infection.

5 February: Miliband pronounces that the "most likely" source of the outbreak is wild birds (presumably seagulls clustering round the turkey shed to excrete infectious droppings into the air vents).

8 February: a Defra vet claims that the source of the virus could be infected turkey meat imported by Matthews from Hungary. But hang on, hadn't Defra just said the virus could not possibly be spread by dead carcasses? And hadn't Miliband said the "most likely" source was wild birds? Do these people actually have any idea what they are saying or doing?

9 February: Matthews denies any link between Suffolk and Hungary, but agrees to halt any "movements of poultry" to or from Hungary just in case. Sales of his turkeys slump by 25 percent, as consumers discover that the "taste of Norfolk" is in fact the "taste of Budapest".

11 February: Miliband rejects any ban on imports of poultry from Hungary saying this would provoke retaliation against Britain from other EU countries, threatening our £370m a year export trade. So we now realise that, even though there appears to have been a major system failure in the paper-trail meant to ensure imported birds don't spread disease from one EU country to another, there is nothing we can do about it, because that would be to interfere with the trade which spread the disease in the first place.

12 February: the owner of several large chicken units near Holton is called by a Defra official to ask whether he has "any poultry?". "Yes," says the owner, "250,000 birds, all within your restricted area." It seems that ten days after the crisis began, Defra still has no idea what other poultry might be in proximity to the Matthews *puten-lager*, any more than it really knows how the virus arrived in Suffolk. But this doesn't prevent Defra giving the go-ahead for the Holton plant to resume processing poultry.

13 February: Defra confirms that the virus strain found in Suffolk is "99.96 percent" similar to that found in wild geese in Hungary, and maintains that poultry-to-poultry transmission was the most likely route of infection, but that to ban "meat imports" from Hungary would be "disproportionate". Noticeably, however, they say nothing about banning imports of young turkey poults. They must be sure that such a thing could never have happened because that would be illegal. And we can't do anything to imperil that £370m a year export trade, can we? It's a good thing the odds against bird 'flu becoming a human-to-human disease are so many billions to one.

'Muckspreader'

Number crunching

£10m ■ Overspend in Defra budget last year blamed on Bird Flu outbreak

£150m ■ Overspend in Defra budget last year blamed on "serious failure in financial management"

POSTCARD FROM ULSTER

ONE of Downing Street's more baffling decisions was the choice of 7 March for the next "historic" election in Northern Ireland, while Scotland and Wales must wait until May to vote.

It turns out that the Ulster date has been arranged with Blair's future career and financial prospects in mind. For officials are working on a nauseating event in Washington the following week, with George Bush and good buddy Blair presiding over a St Patrick's Day photo op, supposedly featuring new Ulster First Minister designate Ian Paisley and his deputy Martin McGuinness.

The happy couple would then return to Belfast for the reopening of Stormont on 26 March, whereupon Blair would pick up a well-deserved Nobel Peace Prize nomination and lots of lucrative speaking engagements from Sinn Féin's wealthy right-wing supporters in the US, led by the very strange duty-free billionaire Chuck Feeney.

Alas, the plan is already falling apart. For although the Paisley family is still wavering over whether to accept the First Minster role, the vicious in-fighting within the Democratic Unionist Party means there's now no chance of them agreeing to meet Blair's deadline.

Worse still, the sudden and unexpected return of Robert McCartney QC to the political fray may wreck the entire project. The former North Down MP has decided to stand simultaneously in six of the 18 multi-seat constituencies (which elect a ridiculous 108 overpaid assemblymen to represent just 1.7 million people). His platform is essentially that Blair is a bastard, Paisley is a bastard and Adams is a bastard, devolution is a waste of time, and a vote for Bob is a vote against all the bastards and everything they stand for.

Even if McCartney doesn't achieve the balance of power in the assembly, there's a reasonable prospect that he can split the Unionist bloc sufficiently to allow Sinn Féin to emerge as the largest party. Although it would hardly reflect genuine political allegiances, such a result would entitle McGuinness to become first minister, with Paisley merely his deputy, something that would prompt the latter to pull the plug on the whole power-sharing executive.

Given that there's also likely to be a low turnout of moderate nationalist voters, and that – following Blair's sudden decision to scrap anti-fraud measures last year – there's been a curious surge of tens of thousands of potential electors (especially in West Belfast) who've suddenly realised that they exist and have applied for postal votes, Sinn Féin may indeed top the poll, or come close enough to terrify the Paisleys into a panic-stricken withdrawal from Blair's beloved process.

Blair could yet spend St Patrick's Day pretending to sup Guinness in No 10 while Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness whoop it up with Dubya at the White House.

Cemetery could be a deathtrap

Sleaford Target

TV

Primeval (ITV1)

WHEN Michael Grade defected from the BBC to ITV, one of the fears raised by commentators was that he might know the corporation's future plans and be able to pre-empt them.

In fact, one reason Gradey left was that his oversight role as chairman denied him involvement in programming. And, as both sides already copy the other's hits as soon as they appear, there would only be the slightest advantage in knowing the future BBC plans marginally before they become ITV's current ones.

The new ITV chief executive, for example, must have felt a sense of déjà vu on inspecting the schedule he inherited. The biggest BBC drama hits of the past two years have both involved time travel – *Doctor Who* and *Life on Mars* – so, wouldn't you know, the commercial boys have nicked the concepts and knocked them through to make *Primeval*, a weekend series in which people and creatures keep slipping through the time-space continuum, pursued by a bunch of eccentrics.

Because the show is aimed at a family audience – screened in the *Doctor Who* slot of 7.45pm on Saturday and repeated next day at 3.55pm – the major source is the one about the timelord or, more specifically, Russell T. Davies's recent renovation of it. *Primeval* creator Adrian Hodges seems to share with Davies the view that the best *Doctor* episodes are the ones set in a recognisable present rather than on some polystyrene planet. *Primeval* is set firmly in 2007, with the monsters and aliens coming from the past to meet our heroes.

The doctor surrogate is Professor Nick Cutter, which is as close as the writers dare get to Nick Cut-and-Paste – which is the basic approach to character-

"We don't have goody bags any more... we have Shilpa bags"

isation and plot lines. A handsome dasher played by Douglas Henshall, Cutter runs a secret Home Office unit which alone knows that the laws of physics are in revolt because of rips in time, and so Britain stands "on the brink of Armageddon".

Like D.I. Sam Tyler in *Life on Mars*, Nick finds himself separated from those he loves. His wife, initially believed dead, is in fact thriving in another temporal plane – "She's waiting on the other side of the anomaly, Nick!" – and occasionally nips back to ask him to move in with her: "Come with me, Nick. I offer you the key to time, Nick, and yet you turn your back on it!"

In his efforts to save the world, Nick is helped by the obligatory set of idiotic but sweet assistants, including a nerd in a pork-pie hat and a scarf. There are also, as in the Harriet Jones episodes of *Doctor Who*, various Blairite ministers and civil servants who just don't get it.

A typical plot line involves a lifeguard mysteriously disappearing from Crystal Palace baths. Inspector Knacker locks his girlfriend up for murder, convinced that she's done him in and hidden the body. Only Cut-and-Paste and his nerds understand the truth, which is that the missing lifeguard has been "eaten by an ancient marine predator, which then swam back to its home millions of years in the past!"

This is Nessie mixed with a few bits from a Stephen Hawking essay, and soon Nick's lot are down in diving suits waiting for the ancient marine predator to swim through the anomaly again, very possibly with a message from Nick's presumed-dead wife in its giant incisors.

Either because ITV1 is scared of Ofcom or because of the mid-afternoon repeat, the series is frightened of being frightening. There's no blood in the water, the monster is seen in glimpses and long-shot and horrific sights are suggested by the faces of the cast – although, if the casting director had known of that approach before the start, some decisions might have been different.

Copycat tosh, this lifeless, witless series may make Gradey wonder if he should have listened to the DG's pleadings to stay: "I offer you the key to TV, Mike, and yet you turn your back on it!"

'Remote Controller'

you are what you eat
With Dr Gillian McKeith
THIS IS THE SHOW WHERE I LOOK AT SHIT
IT'S WHAT'S CALLED...
IDENTIFYING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE
KenPyne

- **Point-by-point: Blair grilled**
- 'No plan' to invade Iraq

BBC News website

FOOTBALL NEWS

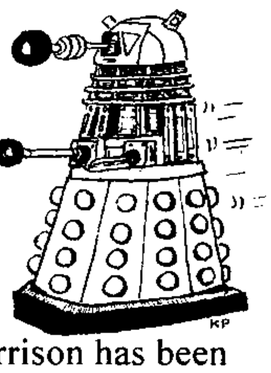
CONGRATULATIONS to Scottish FA president John McBeth on out-manoeuvring English FA chairman Geoff Thompson to grab the vacant FIFA vice-presidency reserved for the Brits.

It carries an honorarium of $100,000 a year plus a further $500 a day expenses every time McBeth leaves the auld country on football business. All 24 members of FIFA's executive committee are paid their money tax-free in Zurich (the Swiss deduct a nominal 10 percent, then FIFA quietly reimburses members) but of course he'll be telling the Chancellor about his windfall from president Sepp Blatter.

The FIFA boss himself is in London this week and has agreed to an "in-depth interview" before an invited audience with the BBC's John Inverdale. No doubt the cleverclogs at media law firm Wiggin – sponsors of the evening at Bloomberg's London studios – will help Inverdale draft the killer questions that Blatter usually dodges.

It won't take long: they're all in the BBC Panorama *The Beautiful Bung* broadcast last June. Blatter avoids discussing which FIFA officials trousered kickbacks from a marketing company. He's also tight-lipped about Swiss police investigations into allegations that he authorised using £1m of FIFA money to secretly repay some of the bribes. The *Eye* has a copy of a court judgement in Liechtenstein last April saying FIFA did. We'll send it to Wiggins and Inverdale.

BIRTSPEAK 2.0



"Peter Salmon, Chief Creative Officer, BBC Vision Studios, announced today two new senior appointments to Vision Studios, the BBC's in-house production base. The new appointments place multi-platform content creation at the heart of the BBC's production operation. Mark Harrison has been appointed as Head of the Multi-platform, Innovation & Development Studio and Richard Williams is Creative Director, Multi-platform for the new studio. The new Multi-platform, Innovation & Development Studio will bring together creative multi-platform teams from drama, entertainment, comedy and factual for the first time into one centre of excellence for multi-platform content creation. It will be the hub for co-ordinating development and production innovation across Vision Studios... Peter Salmon explains: 'The new Multi-platform, Innovation and Development Studio will be a powerhouse for the whole of Vision Studios, leading innovation in multi-platform content creation and driving the modernisation of our production processes."

– Press Release, BBC

DUMB BRITAIN

The Weakest Link, BBC2

Anne Robinson: The Solway Firth lies in between England and which other UK country?

Contestant: Spain.

Robinson: Which European country does Gibraltar have a border with?

Contestant: Greece.

Robinson: Which city in Staffordshire beginning with "L" has a cathedral with three spires?

Contestant: Oswestry.

Robinson: In the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer, what "H", meaning sanctified, goes before "be thy name"?

Contestant: Howard.

The winner of the final bubble competition at the Cartoon Museum *Private Eye* exhibition was **James Couldrey** of London W2.

Jeremy Guscott
Six Nations Rugby
BBC 1, Saturday and Sunday

Cambridge Town Crier

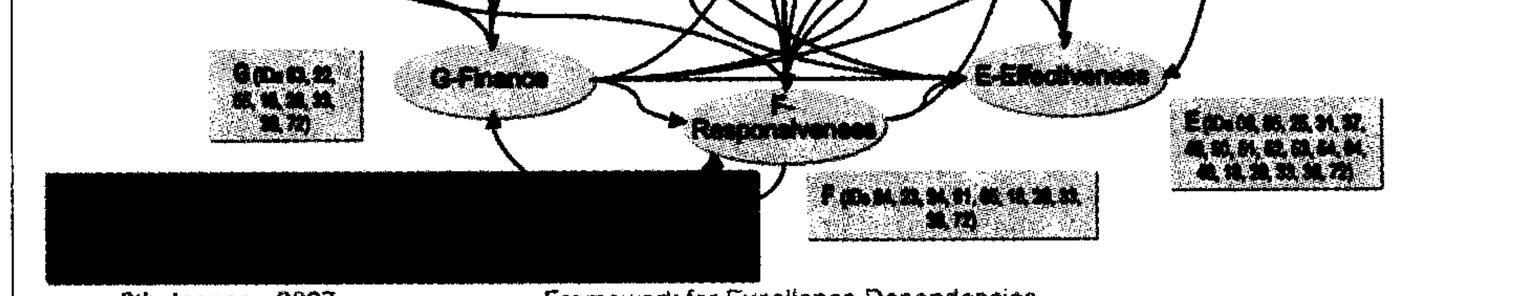
AD NAUSEAM

THE ubiquitous campaign for Apple's Macintosh computers featuring the comedians Mitchell and Webb has already garnered some press comment. Mitchell is cast as the embodiment of the doughy, besuited PC, with Webb playing the hip, insouciant Mac.

The view seems to be that Apple, for once, may have misread the zeitgeist. Mitchell and Webb found fame in Channel 4's *Peep Show,* and in that sitcom Webb's character *thinks* he's Mac supercool, but in fact he's smug and delusional. Mitchell's character, in spite of his PC-like nerdishness, is the one viewers warm to.

That's as may be. The most surprising thing about Apple's campaign is that they bothered to run it at all. Apple products receive unerringly good write-ups and extensive coverage across all of the UK press. The recent launch of the iPhone, which will not even be available in the UK until the end of the year – geological time in tech terms – was front-page news.

This kind of feather-bed treatment is not granted to any other technology company. It might have something to do with the fact, never mentioned in the press, that Apple gives NUJ members a 20 percent discount on all its products. The only question that remains, then, is why Apple is wasting money on a misguided ad campaign when it already has the best promotional vehicle money can buy?

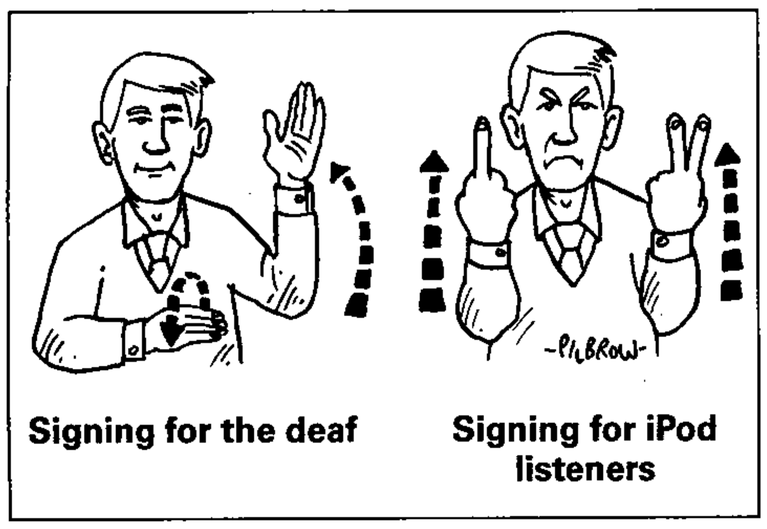


9th January, 2007 Framework for Excellence Dependencies

EVER thought that further education college management was in a muddle?

The Learning and Skills Council describes its new Framework for Excellence as a "radical approach to managing performance", so here's their helpful flow chart, making it perfectly, er, clear how "external stakeholders" relate to "programme architecture".

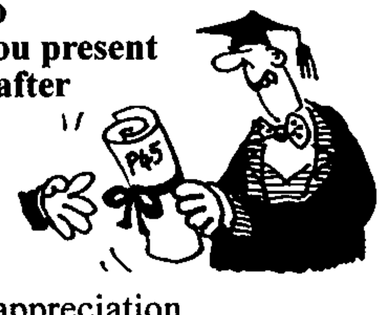
What?



Signing for the deaf **Signing for iPod listeners**

HIGH PRINCIPALS

LOW-PAID lecturers at Manchester College of Art and Technology (MANCAT) were staggered to be asked to contribute to a thank you present for their top managers after an Investors in People inspection.



"There are not many opportunities available for staff to make known their own appreciation for the excellent support and leadership given by the Principalship," commented a memo asking staff to sign cards for the five most senior staff and to make a donation for gifts. So what has Principal Peter Tavernor done to deserve such a show of gratitude?

In January, the Employment Appeals Tribunal threw out the college's appeal against the finding that MANCAT had unfairly dismissed the staff in its Trade Union Education department for, er, trade union activities (*Eyes passim*).

Despite management's willingness to throw the college's money at expensive appeal proceedings, Justice Bean noted in his appeal judgement that the original hearing faced "what must have been a serious difficulty … namely the absence of the principal decision-maker, Mr Tavernor.

A slightly less important witness, Mrs Forshaw, the Deputy Principal, was also not called. There is no suggestion that either of these two individuals was dead, or too ill to assist, or untraceable." Excellent leadership indeed!

OH JOY! The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council has announced yet another "new vision for library services".

Fulfilling their Potential is described by the MLA as a "national library change programme" and includes plans for 20 new "book bars" for teenagers, with waiters who serve reading suggestions along with refreshments, rather than librarians. The bars are to be set up with £575,000 of lottery cash.

Meanwhile the popular Cobbett Road library in Southampton became the latest victim of council budget cuts. It is earmarked for closure to save £50,000 a year, while another £70,000 will be saved by cutting opening hours at other libraries in the city.

How long before the "book bars" go the same way?

GAMBLERS ANONYMOUS have asked us to point out that, contrary to what was implied in a cartoon in *Eye* 1178, they won't be employing any new members of staff because they are actually a self-supporting "fellowship" run entirely by volunteers.

NO ONE could accuse M&S Money's press ad for its new "Ethical Fund" of being misleading, in fact it's admirably frank. It's just wholly contradictory.

"Nobody can guarantee your investments will always do well," it says, "but we can assure you they'll always do good." It's a noble aim, which is then shredded by the small print. "We will avoid investing in companies that have a poor environmental record or are primarily involved in* armaments, gambling, the fur trade, tobacco or pornography. We also avoid investing in companies that conduct or commission animal testing for cosmetic or toiletry purposes or make use of child labour."

As ever, the rub comes with the asterisk, which adds: "*A company that derives over 10 percent of its turnover from any one of these activities will not be invested in." In other words, your investments are not "always" doing good. Ten percent of the time they could be supporting weapons, pornography, child labour and other such ethical pursuits.

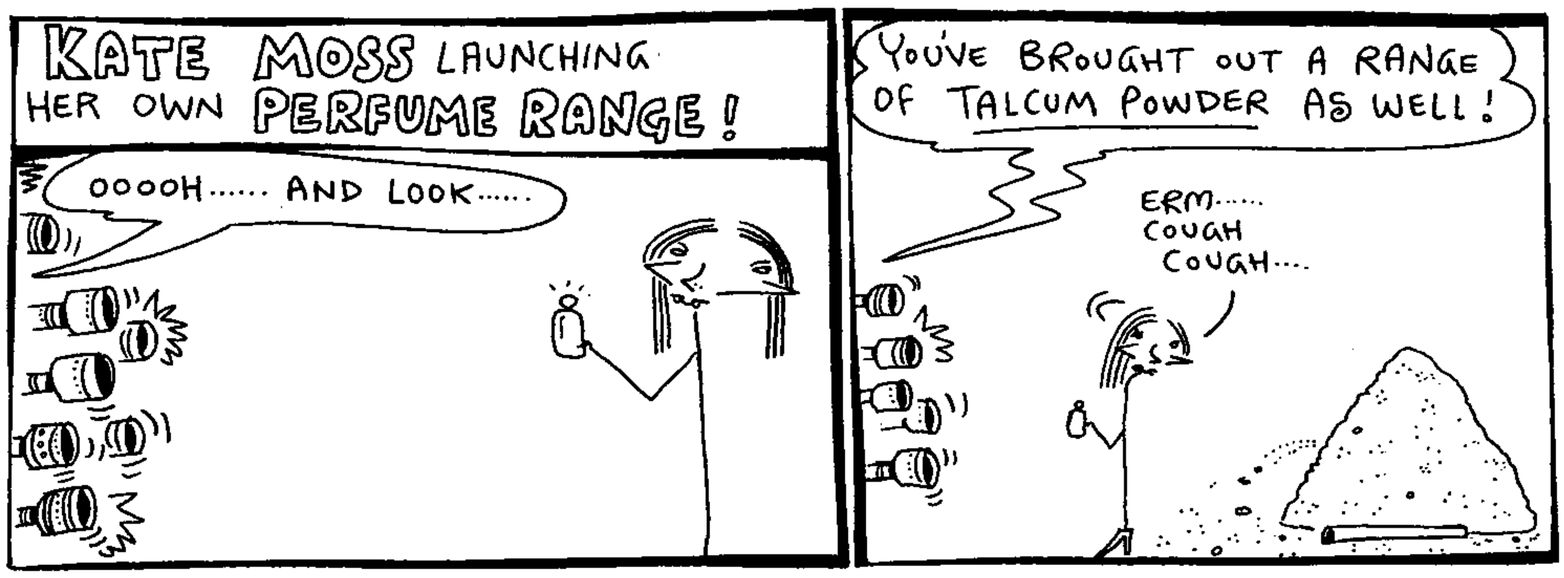
AUSTRALIAN airline Qantas bought up space in several Sunday papers on 18 February to advertise its International Business service with a picture of a beaming air hostess proffering champagne and the offer of "service on a more personal level".

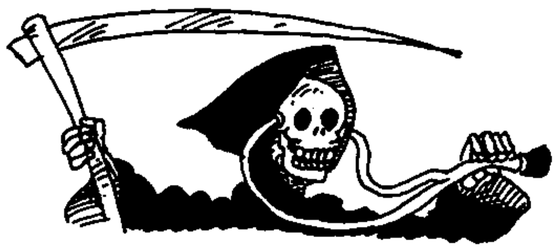
"Everything the modern business traveller desires," the advert promised. "With dedicated cabin crew exclusively for Business and First, you're assured of service with a smile."

And how! The same day's news pages were filled with the tale of how Qantas hostess Lisa Robertson had enjoyed "a passionate tryst" with actor Ralph Fiennes in the business class toilet on board a Qantas flight from Darwin to Bombay.

SUPERMODELS

KERBER


KATE MOSS LAUNCHING HER OWN PERFUME RANGE!
OOOOH..... AND LOOK.....
YOU'VE BROUGHT OUT A RANGE OF TALCUM POWDER AS WELL!
ERM..... COUGH COUGH....



Medicineballs

LAST July, health secretary Patsy Hewitt announced that primary care trusts – which commission hospital and GP services worth £64bn a year – will be allowed to contract out key parts of their work to the private sector.

This plan is being implemented and American companies such as Kaiser Permanente and United Health are establishing a foothold in the NHS. But where is the evidence that the private sector can do it better than the NHS? Er, there isn't any.

The rationale for privatisation of the NHS is based on the infamous "Kaiser vs. the NHS" study, headed by Richard Feachem, a former dean of the London School of Hygiene and published in the *British Medical Journal* in 2002. It appeared to find that the Kaiser model of healthcare was more efficient than the NHS, but the research was flawed at every level. As Allyson Pollock put it: "The data had not been adjusted, as the authors claimed, for the very different populations dealt with in the two systems; inappropriate or even non-existent data were relied on; and an elementary statistical error made a complete nonsense of the overall cost comparison. Such reliable data as there were in the article actually showed the NHS was more efficient than Kaiser."

Alas, the *BMJ* refused to withdraw the paper or publish a detailed and quantified critique. This was eventually published in 2004 in the *British Journal of General Practice* but the damage was done. The DoH encouraged NHS commissioners to sign contracts for clinical services with private companies and now commissioning itself is to be outsourced.

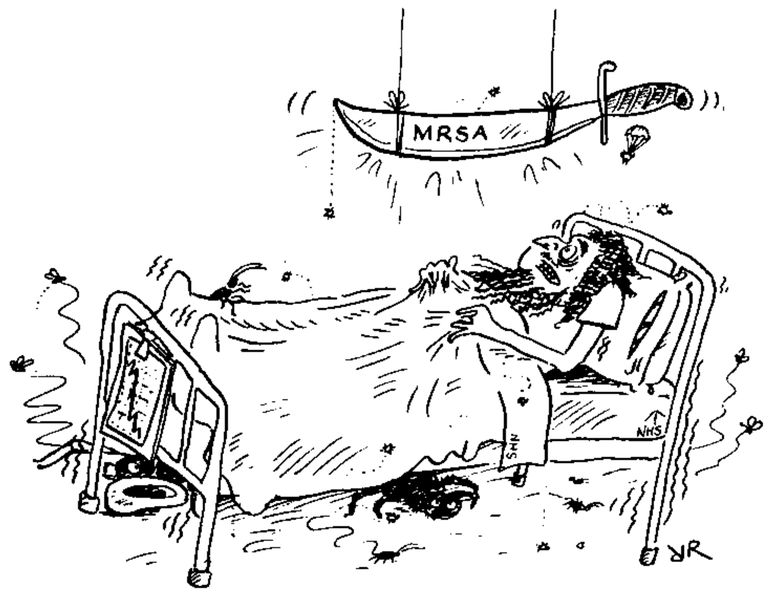
Ex-*BMJ* editor Richard Smith CBE has never apologised for publishing the paper, and is hardly likely to now as chief executive of United Health Europe. In his book he goes as far as asking the question, "Had I published the paper in order to further my own interests?" – but doesn't answer it. Some of the paper's authors had worked for Kaiser, and Richard Feachem was heavily engaged with the World Bank. After publication, he became executive director of the Global Fund, set up in 2001 to fight diseases in the world's poorest countries.

Last August, Feachem claimed the fund's assets were "nothing like enough". Strange, then, that a report by the fund's inspector general has found his lavish personal spending habits created "potential risks", including loss of donor confidence because of "inadequate internal controls". He spent $225.86 to rent a suit for a wedding involving the Dutch royal family and then double-billed the fund's expense account. Lump-sum payments of $5,000 made to seven fund managers were described only as back pay. About 30 payments were made to help staff members find homes. He averaged $376 a day on limousines and shelled out $1,695 on a dinner for 12 people at the US Senate dining room in Washington.

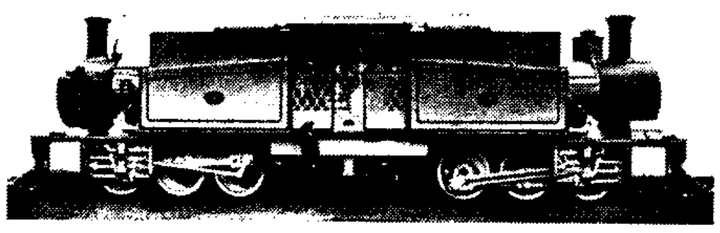
The fund – to which Bill Gates is the largest private donor – has now limited his access to the Credit Suisse expense account. Feachem is clearly not someone who would deliberately misrepresent medical research for his own ends. Last year, he even picked up a knighthood.

Meanwhile the Los Angeles city attorney's office has filed false imprisonment and dependency-care endangerment charges against Kaiser for dumping a patient on skid row in a gown and socks, and leaving her to wander the streets. The process of dumping unprofitable patients is common practice in American healthcare, but this time Kaiser has been caught on video. As one American professor put it: "If one is healthy, Kaiser has a relatively cheap insurance premium. But if one has a serious illness that is costly, Kaiser leaves a lot to be desired". Alas, the NHS may be about to discover this.

M.D.



The Ward of Damocles



SIGNAL FAILURES

Miracle of the Virgin

SURVEYING the wreckage the day after a Virgin Pendolino train derailed in Cumbria, Richard Branson took another swipe at British Rail to emphasise Britain's debt of gratitude to Virgin for bringing new trains to the west-coast mainline (trains which were years late because of the upheaval of privatisation).

"The train itself was magnificent. It's built like a tank," said Beardie. "I think if it had been any of the old trains the injuries and the mortalities would have been horrendous."

Many others, including rescue workers, said it was a miracle the death toll wasn't higher in the 95mph derailment. The same comment follows nearly every train accident; people accustomed to the flimsiness of road vehicles find it incredible that rail carriages are strong enough to remain intact in violent accidents. But this attribute didn't come in with the Pendolino fleet – it's been designed into rail vehicles over the past four decades.

Fortunately the Pendolino in last week's accident came to rest with no major obstacles to impede its deceleration, unlike the GNER train in the 2001 Selby crash (10 killed) which was hit by an oncoming train moments after being derailed by a car on the track, and unlike the German high-speed train which derailed in Saxony in 1998 (102 killed) and hit a road bridge so hard the deck crashed down.

Passengers in an earlier accident on the west-coast mainline, in Staffordshire in 1986, also had the misfortune of a collision. One of the two trains which hit each other at a junction was travelling at about 100mph. "The two locomotives collided with tremendous force, being derailed all wheels and turned over onto their sides, followed immediate [sic] into derailment by the leading eight coaches of the Liverpool train and the leading three coaches of the Manchester train, some of which turned onto their sides and all of which were extensively damaged," said the report of the accident inquiry.

Most of the carriages were of the two designs Virgin later used – and Beardie frequently lambasted – before leasing its new trains. The trains in that crash were carrying nearly 900 passengers between them (compared with about 100 on the Pendolino which derailed in Cumbria), so according to Beardie the mortalities must have been horrendous. Actually the only person killed was a driver, in a locomotive rather than a carriage. All the passengers survived, and fewer than 10 percent of them were injured.

Express warning

WHAT has happened to all those carriages replaced by Pendolinos? They're rotting in sidings or being touted for sale overseas.

Meanwhile, three franchises still use flimsy Pacer trains built in the 1980s to a cost-cutting design based on the Leyland National bus (launched in 1970). Those trains were made by bolting the sides to the chassis, rather than the established method of constructing carriage bodies as rigid tubes.

In 1999 an express train travelling at 50mph ran into the back of a pair of Pacer trains on the west-coast mainline in Cheshire. Despite the relatively low speed, the rear Pacer train "suffered severe damage", according to investigators. Fortunately there were no passengers on that train, but with no grieving relatives demanding justice their structural weakness could be quietly forgotten.

The ex-Virgin carriages are poorly suited to the commuter routes where Pacer trains are used but they could be deployed on long-distance routes to release stronger Sprinter-type trains, which could oust Pacer trains. But Pacer units are cheaper to lease – so the government has vetoed every proposal to replace them. According to *Rail* magazine, First Great Western's new penny-pinching franchise involves dumping 33 percent of the Sprinter-type carriages it started with last year – and keeping every Pacer train.

'Dr B. Ching'

Church News

WHILE the Archbishop of Canterbury tries forlornly to pacify his warring Anglican flocks from America and Africa, a new problem looms. Victoria Short, widow of the British consul-general in Istanbul who was killed by a bomb in 2003, wrote to *The Times* two weeks ago protesting at the suspension of Canon Ian Sherwood, Istanbul's Anglican chaplain.

The man responsible is Dr Geoffrey Rowell, bishop of Gibraltar in Europe, who wants to replace Sherwood with a proselytising young Turkish convert, Engin Yildrim. "We do not believe militancy is the authentic tradition of the 420-year-old Church of England community in Istanbul or anywhere else," Mrs Short complains. "It is very hard to understand why the bishop chooses not to listen to a hardworking Anglican priest."

This isn't the only evidence that the bishop of Gibraltar moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform. He is also responsible for the Anglican church in Menorca, where the current incumbent is the Revd Dr Michael Bunce. On the Menorcan church's website, Bunce boasts of his part in establishing a training scheme for the unemployed while he was provost of St Paul's Cathedral in Dundee.

What he omits to mention is that in July 1997 he was found guilty of pilfering £44,000 from the scheme – what the sheriff described as "embezzlement on a grand scale". The court heard that he had spent the money on horses, paintings, antiques, flying lessons, luxury cars and nights at the Ritz. Although he was fined, the charity which lost the money was never reimbursed and had to close.

Despite Bunce's unpaid moral debt to the disadvantaged in Brechin, and a subsequent misjudged foray into the music business as "the Padre of Pop", in 2000 the church appointed him to a plum job looking after the spiritual needs of wealthy expats in Menorca, where he regularly advertises for donations in the English-language press.

ROTTEN BOROUGHS

WHERE'S WALLEY?

BEDFORDSHIRE county councillor Paul Walley narrowly avoided being kicked off the council in January by turning up for his first meeting in six months.

The Tory council's former deputy leader came and went without speaking. He hasn't been seen since. Which is a shame, as colleagues have some questions they'd like to ask. For a start, they – and Inspector Knacker – would like to know why a sum in the region of £8m is missing from an IT project Cllr Walley oversaw.

As the council's "customer services" portfolio holder, Cllr Walley managed the introduction of the "citizen services partnership" (CSP), a grandiose scheme with a budget running into tens of millions, which aimed to apply internet technology to both public services and council procurement. The Serious Fraud Office is currently combing the project's accounts and questioning relevant parties.

Walley is also under investigation by the Standards Board for England over allegations that he voted on council business while ineligible to do so (he had failed to pay his council tax). He has also just got the order of the boot from the Conservative Party for falling behind on his £50 annual subscription. Last year he trousered around £10,000 in allowances from his two council seats (he also sits on South Beds district council) despite not turning up to either after July. This year, the invisible man has already clocked up well over a grand. Nice work!

POT LUCK

SUNDERLAND council has shown its commitment to regenerating the city's run-down centre with the generous grant of £60,000... to the owners of a private pool hall.

The Labour council's cabinet agreed to hand over the dosh to Great Breaks Ltd, which wants to open a private members-only "sports bar" with American pool tables and giant plasma screens in the basement of Central Buildings, a derelict site in the city's Sunniside area. The rest of the building, which is owned by the Sunderland Housing Group (SHG), the housing association best-known for making a hash of regenerating the city's former council estates (*Eyes passim*), is being turned into one and two-bedroomed flats.

By a happy coincidence, Great Breaks' directors, Diana Griffiths and Lynn Hanley, are the wife and sister respectively of Andrew Griffiths, a director of SHG. That is not the only cosy connection between the pool club, SHG and the council. At least five of the Cabinet members who voted to give £60,000 to Great Breaks sit in the same wards as fellow Labour councillors who are on the board of SHG. No doubt it is all completely coincidental, and the owners of other small businesses in Sunderland who do not have relatives on the board of the housing group or mates on the council can look forward to equally generous handouts.

CLIFF HANGER

ISLE OF WIGHT council has suspended three of its most senior officers in the wake of the *Eye*'s revelations about irregularities in the awarding of contracts.

Chief finance officer Paul Wilkinson, legal boss John Lawson and "strategic director, economic development and regeneration", Derek Rowell (*Eyes passim*) are all on gardening leave pending an inquiry into their involvement in a suspected cover-up of flawed tendering processes over a £13m coastal road scheme involving engineering firm High-Point Rendel (H-PR).

Chief executive Joe "Vera" Duckworth launched an investigation before Christmas after an *Eye* reader on the Island brought his attention to similarities between High-Point Rendel's involvement on the Isle of Wight and the firm's dodgy contract with Scarborough borough council, which led to a sea defences scheme going millions of pounds over budget (*Eyes passim*). Scarborough's director of technical services at the time was, er, Derek Rowell.

Duckworth wants to know why outside legal advice dating from January 2005 that the contract with H-PR "very likely" breached procurement law was swept under the carpet, as were similar doubts in a report the same year by consultants the QP group.

A third report, by lawyer Mark Heath from Southampton city council, has concluded that Isle of Wight council "acted either in ignorance or disregard of procurement rules and regulations and the council's own constitution..." in respect of the Undercliff Drive contract.

Now a disciplinary committee has been set up. Last week Vera told councillors: "I can't emphasise enough the seriousness of this. It's a situation that must not be allowed to happen again."

One person who might be able to help Mr Duckworth with his enquires is his predecessor, Mike Fisher, who was in charge at the time. He was allowed to take early retirement shortly after the Tories took office in 2005, trousering around £85,000 in severance pay to eke out his not insubstantial pension.

STRIFE OF BRIAN

WITH legal supremo Lawson suspended, the Isle of Wight is fortunate in having hired as its "interim director of legal and democratic services" one Alison Lowton, who made such a success of the job of legal chief at Camden that last year the

London borough wound up her department and sent her on her way with a smile, a wave and an undisclosed payoff.

Lowton is best-known at Camden for wrecking the career of Brian Woodrow, a respected senior councillor against whom Lowton made a series of complaints to the Standards Board for England, most of which were dismissed. He is now demanding that Camden repay him the £35,000 it cost to clear his name.

Lowton accused Woodrow, who had been chair of Camden's development control committee for eight years, of eight breaches of the councillors' code of conduct relating to his criticisms of a £2bn scheme to redevelop lands north of Kings Cross station. Cllr Woodrow was removed from the committee, which then controversially approved the scheme last November.

The Standards Board rejected five of Lowton's complaints and the Adjudication Panel rejected another two. On just one it found a marginal breach "at the low end" of the scale and decided it was not "necessary or desirable" to impose any sanction.

At the hearing, Woodrow's barrister Robert McCracken said Lowton "was clearly hostile to Cllr Woodrow. She was struggling with and determined to control Cllr Woodrow and his committee by means which might well have been seen as downright obstructiveness."

Ms Lowton and Camden's former chief planner, Peter Bishop (now Mayor Ken's director of design), are likely to be star witnesses in a judicial review brought by Camden residents and aimed at quashing permission for the King's Cross scheme. The objectors claim that councillors were wrongly advised by planners (i.e. Bishop) and lawyers (i.e. Lowton). Let's hope the case does not distract Ms Lowton from her mission to get the Isle of Wight back on the straight and narrow!

●WHAT is a council to do when its Cabinet member for planning makes a planning application to combine two flats, one of which he is buying with a mortgage generously lent to him by his council leader (and boyfriend) into one mega-apartment? Clearly, a perception of conflict of interest could conceivably arise. So Westminster council has decided to grant a special dispensation to planning committee members to decide the application "notwithstanding that Councillor [Robert] Davis is, or may be regarded as a 'friend' for the purposes of the members' code of conduct". The dispensation has also been extended to include council leader (and lender) Sir Simon Milton, who has even more friends than Cllr Davis!

IT'S GRIM UP NORTH LONDON

KNIFE & PACKER

I'VE GOT TO SAY THIS IS THE BIGGEST JOB I'VE EVER TAKEN ON. I COULD BE HERE RIGHT THROUGH THE WEEKEND...
BUT YOU'VE GOT TO GET US UP AND RUNNING AGAIN!
IT'S ESSENTIAL!
THAT'S ALL VERY WELL, GENTS, BUT I'M JUST NOT USED TO DEALING WITH WIND TURBINES
BUT THANKS TO THIS BABY WE'RE REDUCING HOUSEHOLD CO2 EMISSIONS...
AND GENERATING ENOUGH POWER TO GRIND 80% OF OUR WEEKLY COFFEE NEEDS!

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

▶PC 5566 said, "Due to my inability to deploy my Taser, I had to resort to punching him as hard as I could in the face. It is a taught technique."

–Witness at trial of 21/7 suspects

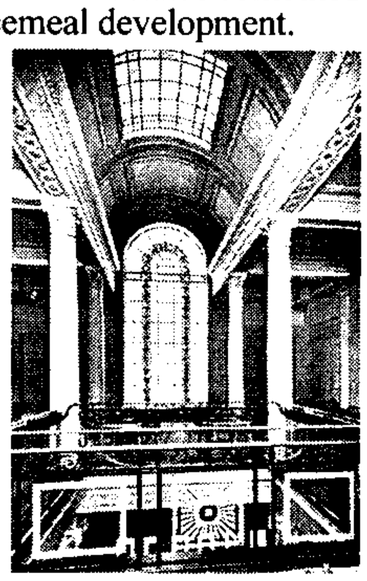
NOOKS and CORNERS

IT MUST now be obvious that Britain is undergoing the biggest and most destructive building boom since the 1960s. London and other cities are festooned with cranes as we enjoy a frenzy of redevelopment – entirely commercial this time round. Can it last?

Sublimely regardless of the huge waste of resources and energy and its effect on climate change, the Mayor of London is eager for more tall buildings while the Chancellor witters on about economic growth. The former Bank of England block in New Change, that elegant neighbour to St Paul's, is coming down when it could easily have been expanded by a competent architect (*Eye* 1143). And all because Land Securities bought the site. And it is Land Securities that is pushing ahead with another overweening development, next to Victoria Station. It will accompany the vast, vulgar cascade of steel and glass known as Cardinal Place, recently completed in Victoria Street. The proposed development is to be carried out with Transport for London to rebuild the concourse of Victoria underground station. Goodness knows the cramped station wants improving, but need it be at the expense of every building on the massive site bounded by the forecourt of Victoria Station, Buckingham Palace Road, Bressenden Place, Victoria Street and Wilton Road?

None of the buildings here is listed (though perhaps some ought to be), but that is not the point. It is too often forgotten that what makes cities enjoyable is variety and the ordinary – the smaller scale, the humble older buildings that afford cheap rents for useful shops, the mixture of textures, styles and sizes, the odd juxtapositions. Such groups of buildings make cities human and interesting – as vast, uniform, enclosed commercial developments do not. And they cannot be protected by listing, only, perhaps, by conservation area status combined with the old pattern of piecemeal development.

Some of the threatened buildings at Victoria are certainly varied and interesting. If the 1960s blocks to the north are expendable, in the row separating the station forecourt from Victoria Street there is the little shopping arcade (by George Sherrin) above the District Line. And in Victoria Street there are several good early 20th century buildings: the HSBC Bank on the corner, a Classical design by Whinney, Son & Austin Hall of 1926; Victoria Station House, also of the 1920s, and the shop of T.M. Sutton, the pawnbrokers, with its original fittings. And above all, perhaps, there is the façade and foyer of the old Metropole, a magnificent cinema of 1928-29 designed by George Coles. The auditorium may have gone, but the richly decorated foyer survives and, restored and adapted, now serves a useful purpose as a branch of the restaurant chain ASK.



Magnificent: Interior of the Metropole

As Westminster City Council declined to extend the Buckingham Palace conservation area, all these buildings will go. And how typical that the development is being designed by the slick American commercial firm of Kohn Pedersen Fox, already busy making Shanghai, Dubai and New York look the same. KPF's first plan envisaged two towers, one of 25 storeys and one of 42. Naturally these delighted Ken Livingstone, but they were opposed by English Heritage and even by Westminster because of the effect they would have on the setting of Buckingham Palace. Now two 50-storey towers are envisaged, which will literally overlook Buckingham Palace. Does the Queen really deserve this? And do the rest of us?

IT IS often forgotten that buildings are statutorily listed for being of architectural or historical importance, which can include being connected with a famous person or event. Undershaw at Hindhead in Surrey was the home of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Designed by Joseph Henry Ball but incorporating many of Conan Doyle's own ideas, it was built in 1897 and is just the sort of gabled semi-rural residence in the Home Counties that Sherlock Holmes would occasionally investigate. Undershaw is listed but only at Grade II, is in a neglected state and is threatened with subdivision into flats and having its grounds built over. To save it, the Victorian Society has campaigned to have it upgraded to grade I or at least II*. But English Heritage – to whom one would not normally turn for literary advice – considers that Conan Doyle, though internationally celebrated, is not of the stature of Dickens or Austen.

This snobbish decision has been supported by Tessa Jowell. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media 'n' Sport is not known for her literary judgement, nor indeed for any cultural accomplishment. This is the woman who is squeezing English Heritage to death and diverting cultural funding to the accursed Olympic Games, and who, when reading out a speech written for her, managed to turn a reference to the great engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel into "the Islamic Kingdom of Brunei". Writing to the Grauniad, she dismissed Undershaw as "unremarkable" and stated that "the building most closely associated with Holmes is 221b Baker Street. I would be only too pleased to consider listing that building Grade I should such a request come forward."

Now, the question is: is this a joke, or does the Secretary of State not realise that this address is entirely fictitious and that Holmes's house does not exist? As the Victorian Society observes: "Perhaps we should consider putting Hogwarts in for listing…"

'Piloti'

I-SPY

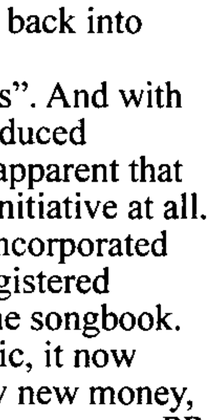
London EC2

Submitted by Bob Farrell.

£10 paid for similar submissions.

(SAE required for return of photographs)

MUSIC & MUSICIANS



IF THERE were ever a blatant example of government camouflaging its indifference to the arts with a bit of tosh, it's been the smiley, feelgood, aren't-we-totally-fantastic launch of the Department for Education and Skills initiative to (I quote) "restore singing to the heart of the primary school curriculum".

Announced at the Round House the other month, it was revealed that £10m (cue swoons and cheers) was being made available for all this singing; that it would involve the creation of a book of 21st century songs for primary schoolchildren (fierce hurrahs); and that it would all be overseen by TV's Howard Goodall (scenes of ecstasy, delirium etc).

What a party. How the hacks rushed to their laptops to write dutiful encomia. And who could deny the need to get serious singing back into schools?

But the key word here is "serious". And with some cool analysis after the DES-induced euphoria died down, it has become apparent that there's nothing very serious in this initiative at all. It's vague, it's ill-planned, and the Incorporated Society of Musicians has already registered dismay at the proposed content of the songbook.

What's more, doing the arithmetic, it now appears that the £10m is not actually new money, more like an accounting trick to get some easy PR out of cash that was in the bag already. And even if it were new money, £10m is nothing in education terms. It's "deeply inadequate" according to the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, which declared itself sceptical of DES methods and criticised them as designed to hide the fact that "nothing has been done to bolster instrumental teaching, despite recent government pledges".

'Lunchtime O'Boulez'

LUVVIES

"I ask myself, do I feel like I hold the bowl of love and go out there in the universe, whether with this person or alone, and have that shield and glow that's incredible? Or do I feel depressive and self-conscious and like I'm walking on eggshells?"

DREW BARRYMORE
Metro

Submitted by Sandy Fox.

"I have never missed a live show," Abdul notes. "Even when I had surgery on my hand (for an infection caused by a botched manicure in 2004), I left my hospital bed to go to the show."

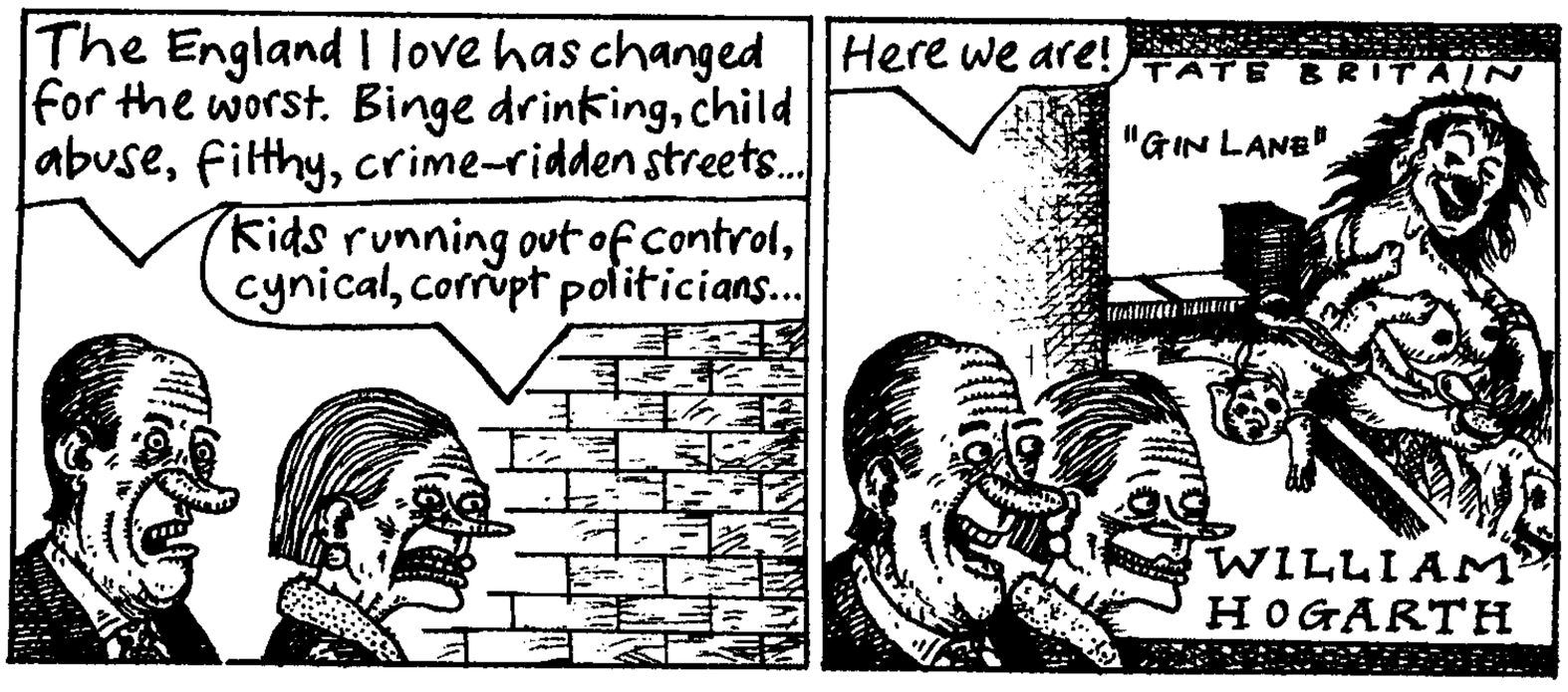
PAULA ABDUL
MSN.com

Submitted by Richard Cooper.

An occasional column devoted to gems from the acting profession. £10 paid for entries.

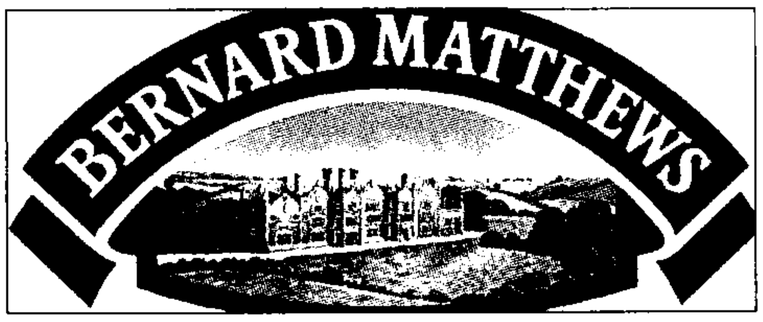
YOUNG BRITISH ARTISTS

BY BIRCH

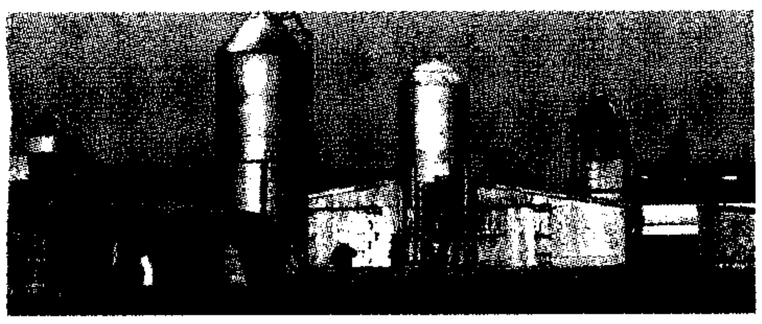

The England I love has changed for the worst. Binge drinking, child abuse, filthy, crime-ridden streets...
Kids running out of control, cynical, corrupt politicians...
Here we are!
TATE BRITAIN
"GIN LANE"
WILLIAM HOGARTH

Letters

Lookalike



Iron sheds



Green pastures

Sir,

I wonder if your readers have noticed a resemblance between the lush green pastures depicted on the packaging of Bernard Matthews turkey products, and the bleak iron sheds in which Bernard Matthews actually rears his turkeys? I can't see any myself.

ROBIN PETHERBRIDGE,

Bath.

Special help

Sir,

Hats off to Lord Gnome for highlighting the challenge facing parents of children with special educational needs as they try to navigate an increasingly nightmarish system (HP Sauce, Eye 1176).

Here at IPSEA, we have numerous case files with similar stories to yours. If any of your readers are facing similar difficulties and lack deep pockets (ministerial or otherwise), they might like to visit our legal charity's website at www.ipsea.org.uk. It has some useful fact sheets, and gives the number and hours of our helpline which is manned by trained volunteers, many of them parents who have been through the labyrinth themselves. We also help parents prepare and present their case at the SENDIST (special educational needs and disability tribunal).

All these services are free - although, of course, all donations are gratefully received!

Yours faithfully,
ROGER INMAN,

Chief Executive, IPSEA (Independent Panel for Special Education Advice).

D-G malfunction

Sir,

Regarding your piece about BBC director-general Mark Thomson's visit to Microsoft's Redmond headquarters, his assurance that the deal would make the BBC's content available "any time, anywhere and on any device" shows a woeful lack of understanding as to what he has done.

The BBC has signed up to include Microsoft's Digital Rights Management (DRM) software which will ensure that people running Apple's Mac OS and various flavours of Unix/Linux will not, in fact, be able to watch the BBC content. Sorry, Mark, that was "on any device", was it?

Regards,
CHRIS MOUNSEY,

London.

Phantom agreement

Sir,

You state on some unknown authority under "Books & Bookmen" (Eye 1178) that, in working with Naim Attallah on his memoirs, I have been required to sign a "confidentiality agreement". No such agreement has been signed by me, nor have I been asked to sign one. This is as great a flight of fantasy as that Naim's writing requires a "ghost".

*I was associated with Quartet Books from the time the company was founded and working long before Mrs Erdal, the author of **Ghosting**, manifested on the scene. My role as Naim's editor is perfectly transparent and openly acknowledged. Like many other authors, he needs an editor, but I cannot see that he ever needed a "ghost". As anyone with a knowledge of publishing will know, there is a distinction.*

Yours faithfully,
PETER FORD,

Orkney.

Equal rites

Sir,

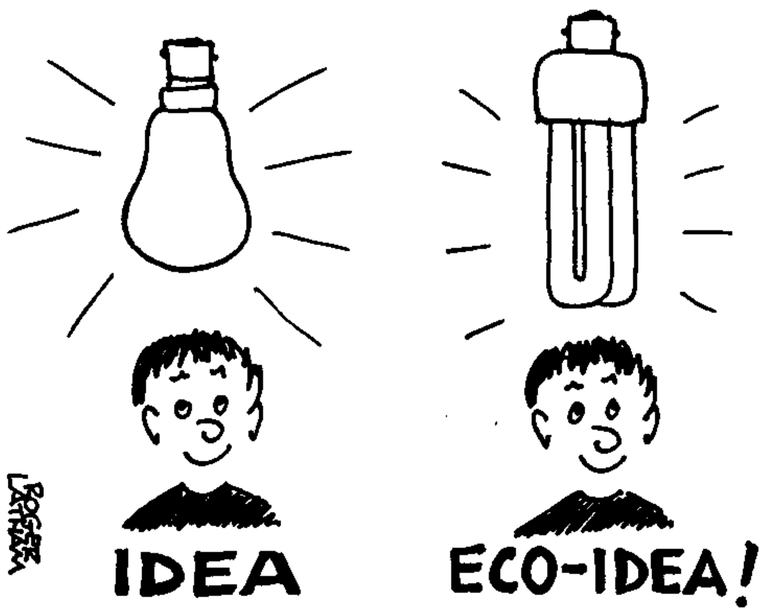
Paul Webster should not feel that his letter was a waste of ink. It allows me the opportunity to offer him reassurance.

I retired recently after serving for many years on a Catholic Adoption agency panel. Applications to adopt were received and accepted from homosexuals as well as heterosexuals. Children were placed irrespective of the applicant's sexual orientation or for that matter, their marital status. Homosexual and single applicants had children placed with them whilst I was a panel member.

I am starting to wonder if the Catholic priest on the panel was keeping secrets from the bishop. If so, he ought to be told!

Yours sincerely,
PETER HEANEY,

Northamptonshire.



Sad nav

Sir,

According to 'Solutions' in issue 1178, Trafficmaster plc is a supplier of speed cameras.

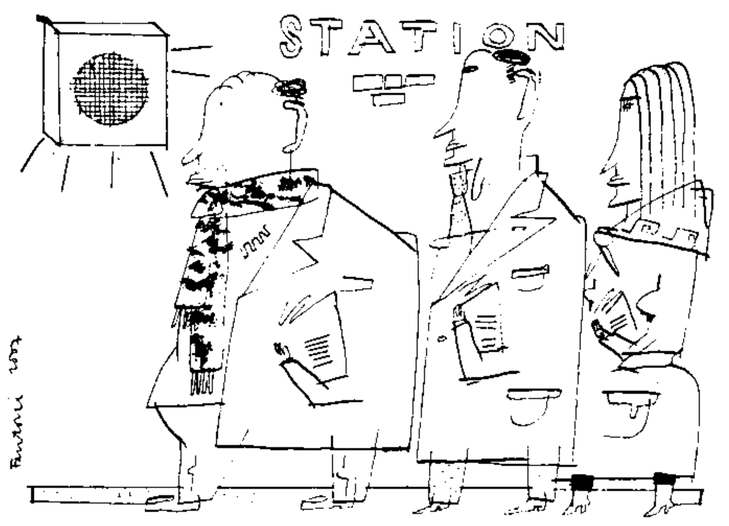
As a shareholder in Trafficmaster plc I can inform you that the company is a supplier of in-car satellite navigation through its Smartnav brand, that it supplies the technology to back up the "pay-as-you-drive" motor insurance policies recently launched by some UK insurers and through its US Teletrac subsidiary provides fleet management information to operators of large fleets of vehicles. It has no involvement in supply or servicing of speed cameras.

I am aware fully of how sad this letter is, but it is the best chance I have had of getting a letter in your superior publication.

Yours faithfully,
KEITH BRADLEY,

Manchester.

Scenes You Seldom See



"There are no cancellations or delays"

Dredged up

Sir,

Your latest report relating to Falmouth Harbour Commissioners, quoting coverage from 2005, is now both out of date and confusing.

A very significant Environmental Impact Assessment has been announced to assess the environmental impact of dredging to create a deeper channel in Falmouth Bay to accommodate cruise liners. This has nothing to do with potential ship-to-ship transfers.

The request made to Falmouth Harbour Commissioners to allow ship-to-ship transfers in the Bay has been referred to the Government for guidance and is currently not being progressed.

In neither, unrelated, case have the Commissioners made a decision.

Yours sincerely,
ANDREW BELL,

Chairman, Falmouth Harbour Commissioners.

Mawr please

Sir,

Re: Private Eye 1178, Ioan the Idiot

Ioan Richard is undoubtedly the most complete twit with emails and his own worst enemy and too fond of "stirring".

However, I am sorry the Eye felt called upon to poke about in our local politics when it does not have anything like the full picture of the underhand skulduggery going on.

As a result of boundary moves to bolster a Labour majority, some areas north of the M4 were moved some years ago from West Glamorgan to the newly created area of the City & County of Swansea. However, despite being a traditionally Labour area, the Community of Mawr consistently returns an Independent (Ioan Richard).

Swansea has a system whereby the most long-serving councillor is put up for Mayor (after a year as Deputy). This, taking into account previous service with West Glamorgan, is Ioan Richard. Ever since then his enemies – and not being afraid to speak his mind he has many – have been doing all they can to prevent this happening.

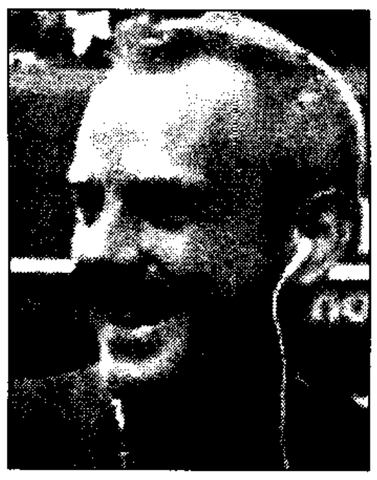
However, unlike many other councillors, Ioan Richard is entirely up-front and transparent, and unlike some other councillors does not have other financial vested interests. And he is an excellent councillor for his ward, actively going out to his community rather than just responding to queries. He has great integrity, and is not swayed by fear or favour, which is something these days.

However, he is a Character – and liable to let his sense of humour run away with him. But he brings interest and amusement into politics – something sadly lacking recently, and often ridiculed.

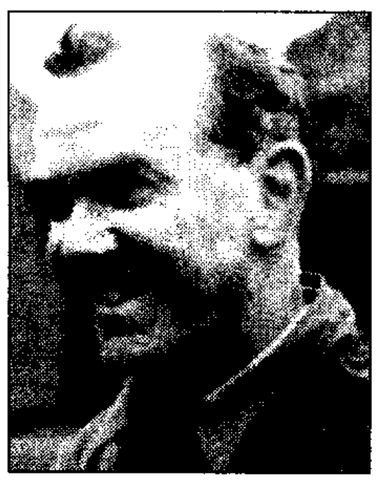
Yours faithfully,
J.C. MOSELEY,

Swansea.

Lookalike



Greene



Cook

Sir,

I was recently struck by the remarkable resemblance between the young Graham Greene, undisputed master of miserabilist fiction, and the popular contemporary DJ, Norman 'Fatboy Slim' Cook.

Is there something we aren't being told?

Yours halfway between
the gutter and the stars,
P. GORE,

Hemel Hempstead.

Column inches on

Sir,

Your item in the last issue's Street of Shame appears to confuse redundancy with retirement. John Edwards has never been made redundant at the Daily Mail. Following his retirement in 2001 he was asked to continue his popular column as a freelance. That arrangement has now come to an end by mutual agreement. Contrary to your assertions the Mail and its readers continue to follow Keith Waterhouse's column with enthusiasm and admiration.

Yours faithfully,
ALEX BANNISTER,

Managing Editor, The Daily Mail.

Unfair to Sun reporter

Sir,

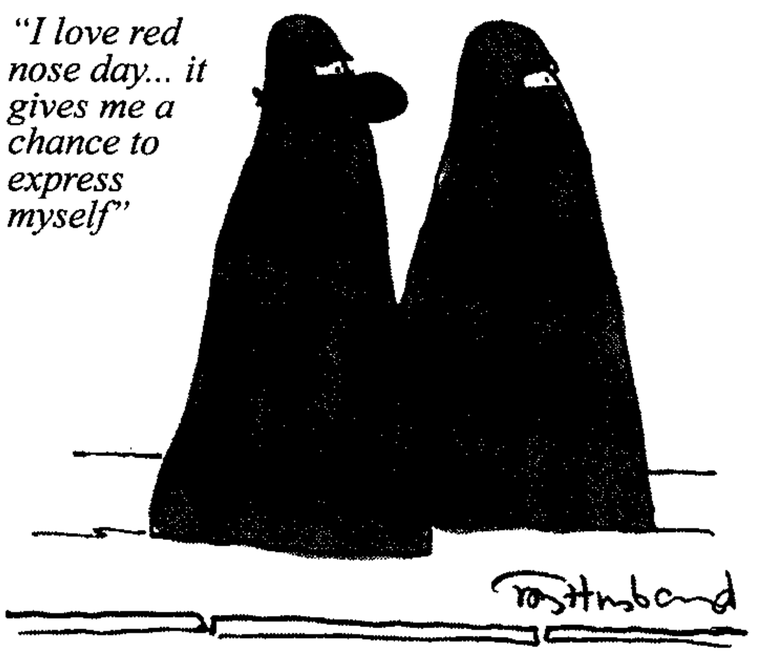
As you are always the first to jump down journalists' throats for being inaccurate, I am disheartened to see you were inaccurate in a report you ran today. You criticised a reporter called Emma Pryer for making up a quote (Eye 1178).

Not only was I at the Kylie exhibition, I provided a quote to Emma Pryer at the Sun as a big fan of hers. I even have pictures of Kylie just a metre away from me if you want proof. Or my goodie bag perhaps would suffice. I would urge you to write a detraction (sic) as it is totally inaccurate to make false comments on young reporters just doing their job.

Regards,
ANNABEL ROBERTS,

London.

● *Fair enough. Ed.*



SOLUTIONS

"Acson Innovative Air Conditioning Solutions" – *air conditioners*

"Farrell: Exceptional office desking solutions" – *desks*

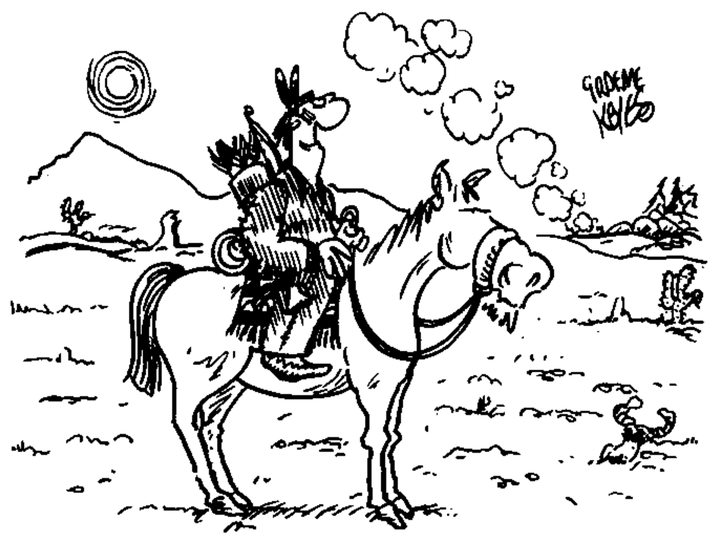
"Timbmet Silverman: Responsible Timber Product Solutions" – *wood*

"Whale Dry-Deck: Wet-room pumped shower drainage solutions" – *drains*

"Rainline: a unique steel-based rain drainage solution" – *gutters*

"Glassex 07: Delivering fenestration solutions" – *windows*

All submitted by readers



Sat Navaho

Divine orbs

Sir,

I have become anxious since Lembit Opik MP asserted in the House of Commons that we can expect the Earth to, again, be hit by a meteor.

Do you by chance have a photograph depicting the result of being struck by a heavenly body?

Yours cowering,
BEN PALMER,

Llandrindod, Powys.

Colemanballs

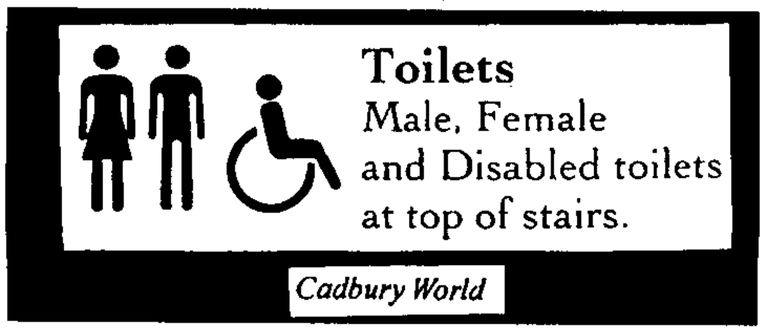
£10 paid for contributions

"He [David Beckham] hasn't spoken much in terms of words in recent weeks."
Sky Sports
(Joe Hurst)

"Gilardino went down almost posthumously."
ITV Sport
(L.R. Armstrong)

"He has lived here for at least the whole of his life."
TRUDI BARKER, Radio 5 Live
(Peter Quinn)

"I was literally hung out to dry by Tony Blair."
DES SMITH
(J.L. Jones)



Pedants Corner

Sir,

... At the risk of been told 'get a life', I feel I must correct Roger Stott, pedants corner issue 1178.

Methane gas is indeed lighter than air, so therefore your cartoon from issue 1177 is very much correct. I should know, as I was once what is now a dying breed in this country, a coal miner, and methane gas, or firedamp to us pit lads, always collected in the roofs of underground roadways, of course making it lighter than air.

DAVE CATON.

... In my teaching days, a favourite trick was to blow soap bubbles using the gas supply, and ignite them. This demonstration would probably fail its risk assessment nowadays (much of the fun has gone out of chemistry teaching) but would always entertain reluctant learners on a wet Friday afternoon.

Anyway, the bubbles always floated upwards. The relative molecular mass of methane is 16, about half that of either oxygen or nitrogen, so methane is lighter than air, as any fule kno. Perhaps fellow pedant Roger Stott (issue 1178) has been breathing butane – a dangerously intoxicating procedure, but who knows what these divers get up to!

BOB LOWRIE.

... Methane has a density in fact just 55 percent of that of air, and is therefore quite capable of making a barrage balloon out of a sheep. At least it can provided that the expanded sheep has a diameter, I calculate, of at least 6 metres. I know all this because I've just done all the sums using Archimedes' Principle. I've even looked up the weight of a sheep (70kg).

How can I get out more when I have to write letters like this?

NORMAN WELLS.

... In his eagerness to get one over Oak Bailey, I think Harry Snook (Eye 1178) has over simplified a complicated issue regarding Orcs and Uruk Hai. It is suggested in the book, and made more explicit in the films that Saruman's Uruk Hai (as pictured) are not the same as the orcs of Mordor or Moria, and that Saruman has created a new kind of Uruk by cross breeding orcs and men. Despite his spelling of 'Urak', I think Oak has got it right.

ANDY MILES (Aged 35).

... As an alumnus of St. Olave's Grammar School (song/motto – 'Olaf to right the wrong') can I point out that the school is in fragrant Orpington and not Bromley.

DR ANDREW SAWCZENKO.

...Piloti's historical geography is a little adrift in Eye 1178. Zetland is the seventeenth century name for Shetland, which is why the Marquess of Zetland is a Scot. The initial "Z" is in fact the letter "yoga", a mediaeval "Y" (properly written as "ȝ") and Zetland should be pronounced "Yetland", which is a rendition into Scots of the original Norse "Hjaltland".

JONATHAN SWALE.

... Colin James (PE 1178) is not being pedantic – he is merely being wrong. Prince William is second in line to the throne but he is not heir presumptive. An heir presumptive is one whose right to inherit can be set aside by the birth of another heir. For example, if Prince Charles had never been born and the Queen had come to the throne in 1953 with Princess Anne as her only child, then Anne would have been heir presumptive, her claim eventually being set aside by the birth of Prince Andrew. It follows that there cannot be an heir apparent and an heir presumptive at the same time.

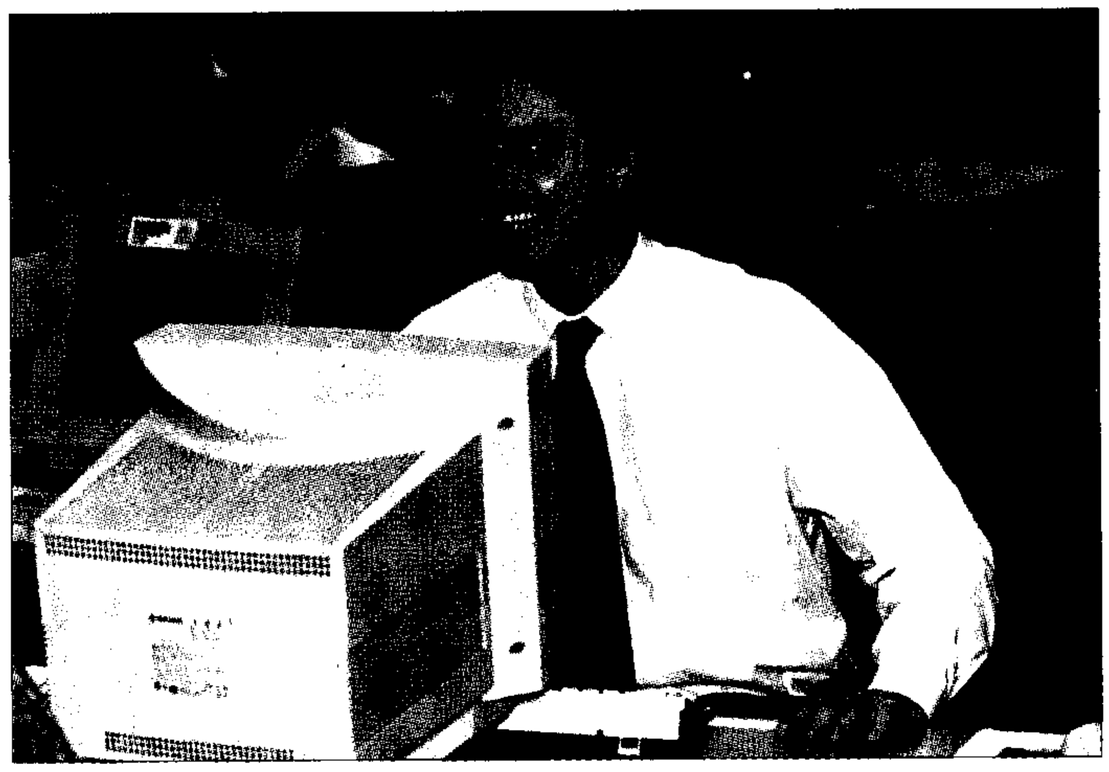
If you print this letter you will presumably put it in Pedants' Corner. Is a desire to see words and phrases properly understood and properly used really pedantic?

MALCOLM SKEGGS.

SYSTEM FAILURE!

A Private Eye special report by RICHARD BROOKS

How this government is blowing £12.4bn on useless IT for the NHS



CLUELESS: Tony Blair, who can barely use a computer himself, naively believed that a grandiose IT project could transform the NHS

"Waste and inefficiency in the NHS is intolerable", declared Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt one year ago amid mounting deficits. "A penny wasted is a penny stolen from a patient." This is the story of the theft of 1,240,000,000,000 pennies from patients through an IT project that wasn't wanted and doesn't work. It tells how political vanity, official incompetence and vested interests have wreaked havoc on the health service – and calls for a halt to the ultimate in a long line of New Labour computer cock-ups before it's too late.

IT WAS never going to grab the headlines at the time, but a "seminar on information technology in the NHS" one February morning in Downing Street five years ago was soon to unleash the most ruinously expensive civil technology programme in British history.

Less than a year after Blair's second election victory, won on a promise of "delivery" in public services, the gathering brought together the government's top IT zealots and the obligatory consultant from McKinsey in the shape of David Bennett. The prime minister's eager Delivery Unit was represented by the newly-empowered "e-envoy", Andrew Pinder, while health minister Lord Hunt and his department's very own "e-champion", the NHS director of information John Pattison, sat ready to give their commitment. All agreed that the NHS could and should be radically transformed by IT. As Blair, who weeks before had been bowled over by a visiting Bill Gates, told one of his triumphant "e-summits": "Government and people should make it the basis of forming relations between citizen and state".

The vision was of a new NHS National Programme for IT, under which all patients' health records would become electronically available, all admissions and appointments would be booked on-line and all medicines would be prescribed and dispensed without pharmacists having to decipher GPs' handwriting. Not only would the plan galvanise the NHS's creaky administration, it would realise the Blairite vision of choice in public health services.

The PM was in no mood to wait, as became clear when NHS information director Pattison recounted the meeting's conclusions soon afterwards: "There was only one question which I thought was rather tricky and that was 'how long will this take?' I swallowed hard because I knew I had to get the answer right... and I said three years. The answer was that is too long, how about two years, but in the end we got two years and nine months, starting from April 2003."

None of the e-evangelists bothered to ask two even trickier questions that have since come to haunt the programme: Does anybody want it? And will it ever work?

HEALTHY COMPETITION

THERE HAD already been no shortage of New Labour attempts to harness the benefits of computer technology to Britain's sprawling National Health Service. The £1bn "Information for Health" strategy had been launched amid the dot.com boom in 1998 by Blair's first health secretary Frank Dobson, who promised an "information superhighway" to be known as NHSNet.

Dobson's plans were in fact little more than funding for GPs and hospitals to get themselves properly wired up and failed to produce the overnight transformation and headlines that New Labour craved. But they had created an environment in which the British healthcare IT industry was innovating and achieving a degree of solid if not revolutionary progress. By early 1999 health minister Baroness Hayman was able to announce that "electronic patient records move a step closer" with the agreement of common standards for computerising medical terminology – the foundation for coordinating health records among GPs and hospitals. And such was the development of the healthcare IT market that by March 2003 McKinsey's Bennett reported that there were 27 "entirely viable and interesting vendors" with suitable software packages to sell.

Yet in February 2002 when Pattison crossed Whitehall to return to his department's Richmond House HQ and draw up the plan demanded by Blair, he had far grander ideas. A City banker commissioned to review NHS funding, Sir Derek Wanless, who had also been represented at the No.10 meeting, was about to demand a doubling of spending on IT to speed up Dobbo's relatively pedestrian plans. And the government's 2002 comprehensive spending review, which would eventually earmark £6bn for IT, was already shaping up as the industry's biggest ever taxpayer-funded payday. The Blairite revolution in healthcare information could command some serious cash.

GRUMBLING APPENDIX

WITHIN WEEKS Pattison and co had produced the required blueprint. Its ambition naturally had a title to match, "Delivering 21st Century IT support for the NHS", while the detail promised to transform the patchwork of IT in the NHS by imposing "stringent national standards" and improved procurement.

But even at the birth of the NHS's National Programme for IT one of the characteristics that would come to define it – deceit – had set in. The original version of the document setting out the scheme, it later emerged, had received an appendectomy at the hands of the spin doctors. Pattison's original draft contained four appendices, one of which was a critical "project profile model" spelling out just what a gargantuan undertaking was proposed. It estimated the cost at £5bn, against the generally reported couple of billion, and gave it a record-breaking "risk score" under guidelines for government IT procurement. Yet when the plan was published the following month the troublesome appendix, which would undoubtedly have raised questions about whether the extra expense and risk were justified, had mysteriously disappeared.

What was left attracted broad support. The

£12.4bn WOULD PAY FOR...

26,000 doctors for ten years

promise of local control alongside national standards was what clinicians and health IT specialists had long been working for. The plans provided for trusts to choose their IT systems from a range of acceptable providers – the key to holding their suppliers to account. And the timetable suggested there might be substance to the government's rhetoric of "delivery". The most important element of the programme – a "full national health record service" – was down to be implemented by Christmas 2005.

With more money, a dedicated NHS director in charge and No.10's enthusiastic backing, at last healthcare in Britain really could be transformed by technology. There was just one snag: the promises would be broken within the year.

THE LONE GRANGER

GOVERNMENT computer projects already had a less than distinguished history. Cancelled holidays following a cock-up at the Passport Agency and hundreds of millions lost in a national insurance screw-up at the Department for Social Security, to name but two fiascos, had shown the damage that could be inflicted on public services with a large IT budget.

A similar result could not be risked with the biggest deal of them all. The health service would need to manage its enormous undertaking and, in particular, control the IT companies that experience showed were far more interested in milking the taxpayer than serving him. Nobody in government had proved up to the job before, so in September 2002 the Department of Health turned to a 37-year old Deloitte consultant, Richard Granger, to become director general of IT and later the head of the agency charged with running the programme, Connecting for Health. Such were the hopes vested in Granger that Pattison informed a parliamentary committee: "I cannot exaggerate the value of Richard Granger to this programme and the likelihood of its success."

AGGRESSIVE: programme head Richard Granger likes to talk tough

From the outset Granger, an IT professional among the civil service amateurs, bullishly dominated. But his aggression, and the alacrity with which his new bosses simply handed power to him, quickly sowed the seed of the scheme's fatal flaw: the loss of any control over the project by the people who would use the systems in the NHS. Granger, the IT man, held sway while those running the health service lost interest; in the space of two years there would be six "senior responsible owners" for the project in Richmond House.

For Granger, the largest civilian IT scheme in British history would be a walk in the park. "When you look at the 21st century agenda for IT," he told a conference in Harrogate six months later, "most of what we want to do has already been done somewhere, so we're talking about joining things up and rolling out best practices." (Appearing on behalf of Granger before a parliamentary committee the same month, Pattison even claimed "we have introduced somewhere in the NHS everything that we want to install"). The £5bn cost lifted from the original report had also magically shrunk as Granger revealed a mere £2.3bn budget for the programme.

Meanwhile, with billions of pounds of public cash on offer, management consultants were crawling all over the project. McKinsey, whose David Bennett was instrumental in winning Blair's support for the programme, was rewarded with a contract to examine the healthcare IT market. Sitting alongside Granger in Harrogate, Bennett declared it to be in rude health. All that was needed, then, was for the many decent IT companies to "join up" and "roll out" what was already out there and within a couple of years the NHS would be electronically transformed. What could be simpler than that?

SHAM MISTAKE

THE CHANCES of this or anything remotely sensible happening were soon blown. Three months after his appointment Granger announced that, far from providing the promised choice to healthcare trusts, there would be five regional monopolies under which a single firm known as the "local service provider" would be responsible for implementing the most important parts of the programme, electronic patient records and administration systems.

All would be linked by an electronic "spine" that would store 50 million patient records and deliver the holy grail of nationwide access to every individual's medical details. Granger's confidence in this enormous undertaking, to be entrusted to a handful of big IT firms, was unbounded. "There is only one outcome from this programme and that is the successful implementation of 21st Century IT for the NHS in partnership with suppliers who perform," he declared.

The crucial contracts were advertised, bid for and signed at breakneck speed. In May 2003 bidders were handed a 500 page draft "output based specification" and given five weeks to get their proposals in. All contracts were in place within a year, against an average for large deals of 27 months, including the time required for the all-important task of deciding exactly what should go in them.

Any number of reviews of botched IT initiatives had shown that this process should have required the intimate involvement of those who would eventually have to use the systems. Yet, in his eagerness to meet New Labour's impatient timetable, Granger did everything to ensure that the messy business of consultation put up no obstacles. Assisted by US consultants Kellogg Brown Root (whose struggles with corruption allegations on public contracts in Iraq were of no concern), he organised the process through a specially created "Design Authority" that was dominated by IT whizzkids.

Official procurement rules, however, required the box marked "users consulted" to be ticked. So one long-standing director of the NHS Information Authority, Anthony Nowlan, was dispatched, he would explain, to "go and find some clinicians" who had seen earlier drafts and could therefore be deemed to have been involved. Betraying the programme's disdain for the proprieties of large-scale procurement, records of where the alleged support of clinicians came from were conveniently not kept. The basis on which billions of pounds of public money was to be spent simply had no audit trail and was, in Nowlan's words, a "sham". His former colleague Professor Peter Hutton, who resigned as the project's clinical leader, later summed up the indecent haste: "In those early days, it was like being in a juggernaut lorry going up the M1 and it did not really matter where you went as long as you arrived somewhere on time. Then, when you had arrived somewhere, you would go out and buy a product, but you were not quite sure what you wanted to buy. To be honest, I do not think the people selling it knew what we needed".

The result was a set of contracts signed, as Tory MP and leading critic of the programme Richard Bacon put it, "before either the government had understood properly what it wanted to buy or the suppliers had understood what it was they were expected to supply". One thing was certain though – nobody would ever be able to look at the contracts as they contained the tightest of confidentiality clauses.

The rushed and secret deals would commit billions to the central tasks of installing patient administration systems, covering basic personal information and appointments, and clinical record systems detailing a patient's medical treatment – all linked to a central "Spine" on which the records would be stored. This was the IT infrastructure that would realise the Prime Minister's vision of personal health information accessible wherever, and whenever, a patient needed treatment. The other key elements were: an electronic appointment booking service known as "choose and book" and a dedicated "new national network" (N3) broadband system.

The National Programme's targets certainly suggested that Granger's ambition would quickly translate into results. CfH's own plans showed that by the end of 2006/07 155 of 176 acute hospital trusts should have been smoothly operating systems provided by their local service providers. But only 16 were, as the seeds of failure sown in the procurement process sprouted into inability to deliver up and down the country.

BAD COMPANY

THE BIG WINNERS of the multi-billion pound procurement sprint were plucked from the usual suspects. The five "local service provider" contracts went to Accenture (which won two), Fujitsu, BT and Computer Science Corporation (CSC) of the US. BT was particularly keen to sign up as part of its efforts to diversify, through its BT Global division, from the increasingly competitive telecoms market into information technology, also snaffling up the two other big contracts: one to install broadband access across the NHS, the other to build the central "spine" on which health records would be stored.

The value of the contracts had unsurprisingly multiplied from the £2.3bn originally given by

£12.4bn WOULD PAY FOR...

65,000 nurses for ten years

THE CONTRACT CARVE-UP

Contract	Contractor	Contract value, £m	Amount earned for delivery up to 31/10/06, £m*
National data "spine"	BT	620	**297**
N3 broadband network	BT	530	**213**
Choose & book	Atos Origin	64	**31**
Local service providers:			
London	BT	996	**3**
North East	Accenture**	1,099	**83**
West Midland & North West	CSC	973	**170**
East	Accenture**	934	**95**
Southern	Fujitsu	986	**27**
TOTAL		6,202	**918**

*** latest figures available, written parliamentary answer 12 December 2006**
**** Accenture replaced by CSC from January 2007**

Granger to £6.2bn. And they would run for 10 years rather than the three envisaged. Already the deal reached with Blair at the No.10 seminar, for a precise "two years and nine months", had been spectacularly broken.

The choice of big firms for big contracts reflected Granger's macho approach. He wanted companies with financial muscle, claiming that they would only be paid for delivering results and that, should they fail, he would hold their "feet to the fire". In Granger's rhetoric the suppliers were "huskies" who could be shot if they went lame and "fed to the other dogs" if necessary.

The big contractors, in turn, relied on software specialists. Most popular was a rising British technology star called iSoft, which had been spun out of KPMG's consultancy practice in 1997. To the stock market's delight the firm was picked to partner Accenture and CSC for their three areas, thus putting more than half the country's hospitals at the mercy of iSoft software.

This might have looked a shrewd move at the time, but it soon emerged as anything but. The company had promised that by March 2004 it would have developed a snazzy new software programme called Lorenzo as the foundation for transforming 100 acute hospitals. The company's accounts duly declared it available that year. By early 2006, however, the firms relying on it, Accenture and CSC, reported that there was still "no believable plan" for the product to be made available. Instead, to make any progress at all the companies were forced to use iSoft's old software, while the date for Lorenzo's arrival was put back to 2008.

iSoft's economy with the truth wasn't limited to software delivery dates. As *Private Eye's* "Slicker" had foreseen almost two years before, in June 2006 the company was forced to write off all its past profits when it emerged they were the product not of successful software development but creative accounting. On the back of fictitious figures the directors had made fortunes in bonuses and share sales. In the meantime, the company was surviving only with the help of secret advances from CfH – the body that had always claimed it only paid for results.

It wasn't long before Accenture, ironically the most successful of the local service providers, having made decent progress with primary care trusts on its patch, was reporting the most acute financial pain. In March 2006 the firm set aside £250m for what it expected to lose, citing iSoft's failure to provide adequate software. Then, with no sign of the promised Lorenzo, in September it cut its losses and pulled out. One insider told the *Eye* that Accenture repeatedly offered to fulfil its contract using other companies' software but the proposals were rejected by Granger as this might have bankrupted iSoft. NHS information technology played second fiddle to the survival of a tottering software company under investigation for serious financial irregularities.

Despite a public threat from Granger that "if they would like to walk away, it's starting at 50 per cent of the total contract value", Accenture escaped at minimal cost, foregoing just £63m in payments (6 per cent of the contract value). Amid speculation that, had Granger gone after any more, the firm would have had some embarrassing counter-claims of its own, the threats proved damp squibs. Unabashed, however, days later Granger boasted at a government IT seminar that he had terminated the contract of a small British supplier, ComMedica, putting it out of business. The tough-talking boss was not so much standing up to the big boys as bullying the little ones.

Accenture's surrender and the handing of its contract without any competition to CSC, in the process passing control of the programme across 60 per cent of the country to a US company struggling back home with allegations of boardroom corruption, was more than just a setback. It spoke volumes for the project's prospects, as Richard Bacon MP explained to an IT conference: "The fact that a firm such as Accenture, which has done so much government work and faces such a risk of reputational damage by leaving the national programme, has nonetheless done so is an eloquent comment on the problems."

BRITISH TELE-CON

AT LEAST Accenture acknowledged the futility of its task and admitted defeat. Others, more sensitive to the likely PR damage from owning up, tried to hide the negligible progress that the *Eye* began to expose. The worst performer was – and is – BT in London, which since signing the contract in 2004 has installed just one patient administration system in the 33 acute hospitals on its patch. And, as with all the companies, it is nowhere near delivering the clinical systems. At this rate of "progress" what was billed as "21st Century IT" for the NHS won't arrive until the 22nd.

For its efforts as local service provider for the capital BT had earned just £2.7m on a £1bn deal (0.27 per cent) by October 2006, despite having spent hundreds of millions. Early in 2005 it was officially notified that it was in breach of its contract, prompting Granger to vent his frustration in an interview for *Computing* magazine. Once again he declined to pass up a murderous metaphor: "We will get very soon to a point where they will either come good with what they've got, or they will get a bullet in the head." All too predictably and despite next to no progress since then, however, the company has not been punished and can pretend all is well.

In November 2006 the company reported that "BT continue to make good progress on its NHS National Programme for IT contracts", when this clearly wasn't the case. Not only had BT achieved significantly less than Accenture had when it packed its bags, but it too was forced to ditch its software supplier, IDX, in 2006 in favour of another US company, Cerner, that was showing hardly better results as software supplier in the South of England.

BT's performance didn't surprise close observers; it had always been a hit and hope affair. Soon after winning its contracts chairman Sir Christopher Bland said the company felt "slightly like a dog chasing a car. What do we do if we catch it? Well, we've caught it".

By the end of 2006, so desperate was BT to make progress that it set about recruiting NHS

A VERY PAINFUL PROCESS

Wiring up England's acute hospitals under the National Programme for IT

Region/local service provider	Number of hospital administration systems due by 31/03/07*	Number installed by 03/02/07**	Number of clinical record systems due by 31/03/07*	Number installed by 03/02/07**
NW & W Midlands/ CSC	45	**10**	40	**0**
East/Accenture	27	**0**	27	**0**
North East/ Accenture	22	**2**	22	**0**
London/BT	24	**1**	23	**0**
South/Fujitsu	37	**3**	37	**0**
TOTAL	155	**16**	149	**0**

***source: www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/all_images_and_docs/imp_plan_0105.pdf**
**** source: www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk/delivery/servicemanagement/deployment/comms_rep_jan.pdf**

£12.4bn WOULD PAY FOR...

The NHS's record 2005/06 deficit 23 times over

iSOFT SELL: THE MEN IN THE MONEY

THE MEN behind the bent accounts and inoperable software at key National Programme supplier iSoft might have let the NHS down, but they certainly feathered their own nests in the process. The illusory profits generated by Enron-style accounting for its NHS contracts saw the company's share price go through the roof in 2004 and 2005.

As the shares rocketed, the directors pocketed. Chairman **Patrick Cryne** trousered £28m in share sales in 2004 and 2005 while commercial director **Steve Graham** pulled in £20m while the shares were worth more than 400p each – on top of their six-figure bonuses. Chief executive **Tim Whiston**, who had been finance director from 1997 to 2004, offloaded around £5m worth. The shares are now trading at 50p.

Cryne and Whiston eventually resigned after the extent of the financial mis-statements was revealed, Whiston taking a £550,000 pay-off. Steve Graham remains suspended. The Financial Services Authority and accountancy regulators are currently investigating, which could prove embarrassing for one of the firm's non-executive directors. **Sir Digby Jones**, former CBI Director General, sat on the audit committee when the accounting policies were approved. He has since taken a job with iSoft's new auditors, Deloitte.

COINING IT: Patrick Cryne and Tim Whiston

Also doing very nicely were directors of the National Programme's biggest supplier, BT. By maintaining that minuscule income on its largest contract, as supplier to London, had not cost it money the firm was able to show £100m profit growth for 2005/06, presenting IT chief **Andy Green** with a £400,000 cash bonus and £300,000 in bonus shares. Chief executive **Ben Verwaayen** bagged £784,000 in bonus cash and £1.3m worth of shares for this performance. Had the company's figures reflected the parlous state of its main NHS IT contract the profit growth, and thus the bonuses, would have disappeared.

The salaries and fees paid by BT to the former Government e-envoy **Andrew Pinder** and programme enthusiasts from the NHS in London, **Paul White, Brendan Major and Sir Jonathan Michaels**, remain undisclosed.

One man whose pay was eventually revealed was head of the programme **Richard Granger**, taken on in September 2002 at £250,000 per annum. By this year he was the country's highest paid civil servant on £292,000 and has earned more than £1m from the health service. Taxpayers should be grateful, however. According to health minister Ivan Lewis, "he accepted a very substantial reduction in pay and allowances on joining the department". How public-spirited!

insiders to persuade their old colleagues to sign up with the company. Both the chief executive, Paul White, and IT director, Brendan Major, of Barts and the Royal London NHS Trust, which had not long before signed up for BT's systems, were put on the company payroll – the former to run all its NHS IT work, the latter, in his own words, to "bridge the sometimes substantial distance between BT and London's individual trusts". Soon they were joined by the chief executive of Guy's and St Thomas', Sir Jonathan Michael.

Although the companies had earned next to nothing on their regional contracts, the *Eye* discovered that CfH had been secretly propping them up for years. Despite ministerial claims in Parliament that the firms had been paid trivial amounts, by March 2006 they had in fact received £443m in "advance payments". £83m had gone to the worst laggard, BT, even though official responses put its income at just £1.3m. CfH explained that the forward payments enabled the suppliers to "recognise" income, ie count it in their accounts even though they hadn't delivered the product, and could be recovered. So although Granger had insisted he would "remunerate suppliers for successful delivery but not for delay and failure", he had always been happy to stump up cash on the quiet to help them impress the stock market.

The programme's stagnation could be traced directly to the disastrous early decisions on the project, exacerbated by the NHS's general financial malaise. Botched contracts didn't cater for what the NHS really needed, financial pressures on trusts made them reluctant to commit to replacing their IT systems wholesale without any guarantee of improvement and the software simply wasn't up to the job. By opting for five big regional monopolies under four multinational contractors, Granger had forced the companies to turn to the big software houses at the expense of the many smaller and more adaptable healthcare IT specialists that he spurned. That meant iSoft or the big American firms Cerner and IDX. While iSoft became consumed by a financial scandal of its own making, the US software bought in by BT and Fujitsu was proving unfit for purpose because it had been, er, written for US healthcare systems. These were built around billing for care and were unable to produce the data on which NHS management depends. The National Programme wasn't based on what the NHS needed, but what the big suppliers wanted to sell it.

As a result, wrote David Kwo, who resigned as head of the programme in London: "The National Programme has not advanced the NHS IT implementation trajectory at all; in fact, it has put it back from where it was going. For example, local initiatives to deliver more seamless care through common systems... have been stopped for several years".

CRASH ON DELIVERY

THERE WAS one silver lining to this cloud of incompetence. At least only a few hospitals were being lumbered with IT under the National Programme; when it was put in catastrophe was rarely far behind.

Among the first hospitals to install a patient record system, back in November 2005, was BT's sole "success", at Queen Mary's, Sidcup. Immediately, *Computer Weekly* magazine reported, the system was frequently unavailable. Chief executive Karen Grimes told a health conference how it had lengthened waiting times and contributed to the hospital missing its accident and emergency targets. And in a particularly bitter twist, the trust was hammered by the inability of its system to cope with another NPfIT programme, "choose and book" – of which more later. Whilst nearby hospitals could accept GP referrals under choose and book, the IDX software installed at Sidcup proved incompatible. Under government health reforms that pit one hospital against another, that spelt a disastrous loss of income: around £3m at a trust already struggling with a large deficit. To make matters worse, Grimes complained, the trust couldn't claim compensation for its lost income; one of the paralysing clauses in the contracts was that legal action against the big suppliers had to be sanctioned by the health secretary.

Greater disasters quickly followed, notably at the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre (NOC) where Fujitsu's installation of Cerner software caused a disaster that demanded a "serious untoward incident" report to the National Patient Safety Agency. The NOC's Chief Executive told the *Oxford Times* that problems included "inability to print patient invitation letters and incorrect schedules for patients who need to be seen by particular dates". Operations were cancelled and the board reported a "significant backlog of outpatient appointments", causing the trust's three-star rating to be replaced by a "poor" label. As it struggled with competition from a nearby independent treatment centre that was creaming off routine NHS business and to which GPs were being pressed to refer patients, this was all it needed. A strategic health authority review in December 2006 suggested that Nuffield, also lumbered with a crippling PFI scheme, might simply have to close – brand, spanking new IT system and all. A more fitting testament to New Labour health policy it would be hard to find.

Such failures couldn't be dismissed as mere teething troubles; there were far too many for that. In September 2006 a *Computer Weekly* investigation unearthed 110 "major incidents", those at "severity one" defined as causing "a significant adverse impact on the delivery of patient care to a large number of end users; or... significant financial loss and/or disruption". Most involved the collapse of systems to access electronic X-rays but several compromised the patient administration of entire hospitals. Typical was the disappearance of data on 800 outpatient appointments during a software upgrade at Birmingham Children's hospital, exposed by the e-Health Insider website in July 2006, causing chaos for a fortnight.

The most serious single incident illustrated

E-ENVOY: Andrew Pinder went on to work for BT

£12.4bn WOULD PAY FOR...
Every hospital built since 1997 three times over

the folly of the programme's over-centralised approach and the risks it continues to pose. In July the 80 trusts across the West Midlands and North West that had installed CSC's systems, including eight acute hospitals, were thrown into chaos when the company's data centre collapsed. More than half had to operate for several days without the administration systems they had been told they could rely on – an inconvenience that would have been a catastrophe if the clinical record systems that should have been installed had been. It was only because the programme was so far behind schedule that millions of patients' medical records didn't vanish into the ether. For this debacle CSC was fined a mere £600,000, or £7,500 for each trust that it had thrown into turmoil – much less than their recovery costs. So much for holding the suppliers' "feet to the fire".

CHOICE WORDS

ANOTHER BIG hope for the National Programme was that it would provide the "choice" Blair had promised across the public services – whether patients wanted it or not. And the only real point at which some choice could be injected was when patients are referred to hospital.

The plan soon became known as "choose and book" and was handed to one of Granger's old employers Schlumberger Sema (later to become Atos Origin) under a £65m contract. It would, in then health secretary John Reid's words, enable patients to "choose, from a menu of options, which hospital they would like to attend at a date and time to suit them" and "take away the uncertainty and anxiety of waiting". Patients would leave their GP either with a referral booked on-line in the surgery or a reference number allowing them to book in at their convenience after flicking through the various hospitals' brochures.

It didn't quite work out like that. Before long the costs had gone up to £200m, though CfH insisted the rise was merely due to "some additional implementation and development costs and these are also on budget". Technical problems ranged from frequent crashes – including on the very day in January 2006 that Patricia Hewitt declared "choice is now a reality in the NHS" – to incompatibility with systems used by the hospitals on the receiving end. Unsurprisingly interest in the system remained lukewarm at best despite the offer of £95m in financial inducements to GPs to use it.

Such limitations put take-up of the system desperately behind target. But as Hewitt had made it the main vehicle for patient choice in the health service, it became the focus of serious political pressure. With the numbers of choose and book referrals languishing at less than 20 per cent of the promised 10 million per year, in May 2006 Lord Warner, who had ministerial responsibility for the project, promised on *Newsnight* to resign if the target hadn't been hit by March 2007. In January 2007 C&B appointments were officially running at around 60,000 a week – still only 30 per cent of the target rate. In the same month Warner resigned, citing "personal reasons".

On the ground, the system was proving farcical. Appointments officially booked using the system often had to be backed up with pen and paper anyway while the poor souls sent away to arrange their appointments were left with bewildering choices they felt unable to make.

GPs and consultants weren't impressed either. In January the *Eye's* MD reported how the system frustrated sensible prioritisation and, in the words of a consultant from the hapless Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre, remained "complex, expensive and unworkable". A survey by Medix, an independent research organisation, at the end of 2006 found that more than 90 per cent of GPs thought it increased the time dealing with a referral and 70 per cent that it made no difference to, or harmed, patient outcomes.

The other big elements of the National Programme were faring little better. The N3 broadband system ("one of the largest virtual private networks on the planet" according to Granger) offered insufficient bandwidth for many important functions, such as choose and book. Trusts had to pay tens of thousands for upgrades from the contractor, BT, before it would do what they wanted – taking the costs

OFF-TARGET: Lord Warner resigned as minister

to many times those of commercial alternatives. A spate of internet time-outs even revealed that the BT contract imposed no time limits on fixing faults.

The telecoms firm desperate to prove itself in IT was also fouling up the child vaccination record system across London. So many records were lost that the Health Protection Agency reported: "Comparing the year 2005/6 to 2004/5, the number of children in London who are missing from the COVER programme is nearly 18,000 for children turning 12 months, over 14,500 for children turning 24 months and nearly 19,000 for children turning 5 years of age... If new child systems fail to deliver... then children risk missing out on vaccination. Thus, they remain unprotected and eventually will catch measles, mumps, and rubella infections." Despite promises to fix the problems, by early 2007 records were still being lost.

MONOPOLY MONEY

SURVEYING THIS litany, smart NHS trust directors looking to upgrade their IT might have been expected to look outside the National Programme. Unfortunately in 2003 they had been, in CfH's words "directed by the Secretary of State [John Reid] to use the contracts under the National Programme for IT since these had been shown to demonstrate best value for money." The contracts in fact hadn't demonstrated anything by that stage; they hadn't even been signed. Trusts wouldn't be able to examine the companies' performance and decide whether to use them, as any intelligent

WHO'S IN THE IT

Tony Blair. The Prime Minister who pushed the big idea of a single national care record accessible nationwide.

Gordon Brown. The "prudent" Chancellor has been nowhere to be seen as billions leak from the public purse. His only interest has been using the programme to claim £3bn a year savings, from 2007/08, under the government's "efficiency" programme. This depends on "better use of staff time... through the implementation of a modern [IT] infrastructure for the NHS". Although the most important systems won't be in for years and much of what has been installed is taking more time, the spurious efficiency claims have not been retracted.

Richard Granger. Appointed Director General of NHS IT in September 2002 and head of the National Programme from its inception. Started his career in oil before moving into IT consultancy at Andersen Consulting and then as a partner in Deloitte. Won the NHS job on the back of his work on the London congestion charging scheme IT systems (after a few teething troubles judged a success). Talks in management-speak with added menace, responding to accusations of bullying by admitting "a range of behaviours attuned to what's necessary to achieve things".

Sir John Pattison. NHS Director of Information who produced the blueprint for the National Programme, "Delivering 21st Century IT Support for the NHS" in June 2003.

Andrew Pinder. Government e-envoy from 2000 to 2004, who in a previous job had computerised the Inland Revenue's PAYE records. Instrumental in the IT strategy that led to the National Programme and a key figure at the February 2002 Downing Street meeting and in selecting Richard Granger to run the programme. Soon after leaving government he became a consultant to BT, the programme's largest supplier.

David Bennett. McKinsey consultant who also played a prominent role at the No.10 meeting. In 2005 moved permanently into Downing Street as head of the Prime Minister's Policy Unit

Lord (Philip) Hunt. Former health administrator who was first given the National Programme ministerial brief. Resigned from government in 2003 over Iraq war. Resumed responsibility in January 2007 following resignation of **Lord (Norman) Warner**, who had held the brief for three-and-a-half years.

Alan Milburn. Achingly New Labour health secretary from 1999 to 2003 who gave the go-ahead to the National Programme.

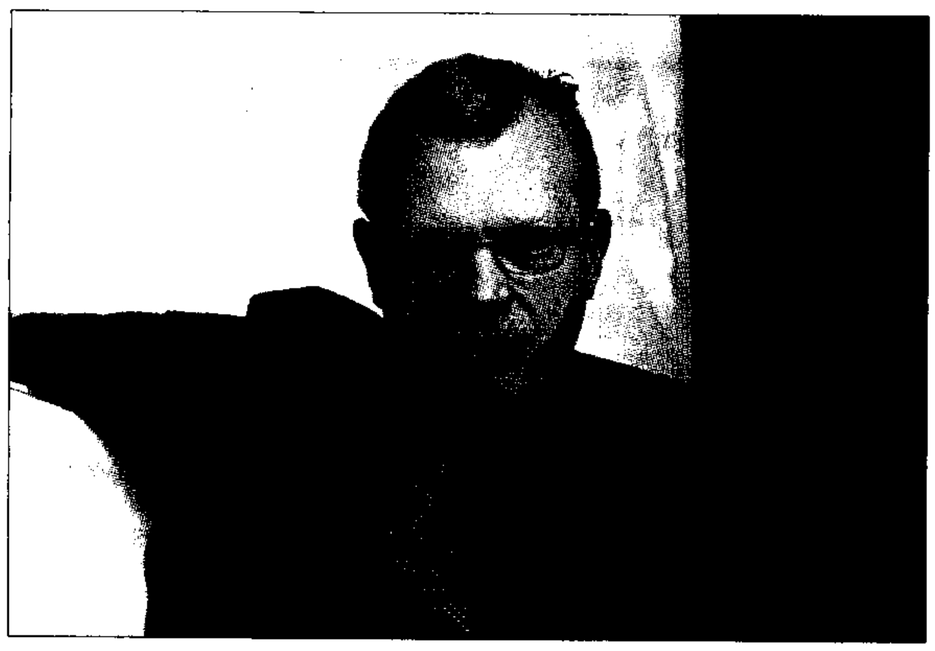
John Reid. One time Marxist, the health secretary from June 2003 to May 2005 who approved Granger's centrist approach and monopoly contracts.

Patricia Hewitt. Current health secretary and self-declared scourge of waste in the NHS, who now has the job of sorting out the mess.

£12.4bn WOULD PAY FOR...
200 years of currently 'too expensive' Alzheimer's drugs

customer might. The regional monopolies of BT, Accenture, CSC and Fujitsu were state-enforced and unassailable.

When these companies did get some systems installed they were, unsurprisingly, not slow to turn the screw on their customers, the trusts. That's what monopolies do. Evidence emerged, for example, in primary care trusts of the companies charging around £5,000 to transfer data from old systems to new (and taking ages to do it), compared to a price of half that before the National Programme contracts. Although Granger had insisted in 2003 that



OUT AND IN: Lord Hunt has been in charge twice

"this isn't about sweeping the board clean and bringing in ruthlessly standardized solutions", that was exactly what would happen. Even the man who loved the programme so much that he went to work for BT, Sir Jonathan Michaels, admitted as much in a speech in March 2006: "...the constraints of standardisation are that effectively all other IT investments hitherto become legacy needing to be replaced... So where the marketplace already has solutions they are not available to us under Connecting for Health." Repeated warnings from experts and parliamentary watchdogs to avoid giving suppliers such power over public services had gone completely unheeded.

The suppliers thus have the NHS trusts on their patch over a barrel for many years to come, with no chance of opting out. As the programme stumbles into its fifth year, the 2007 NHS plan pushes responsibility for getting the companies' unloved IT into as many trusts as possible onto the strategic health authorities, whose trusts must draw up detailed plans for introducing the half-baked systems. Not only will this entrench the programme further, it neatly ensures that the blame can eventually be apportioned as far from Richmond House and CfH's Yorkshire HQ as possible.

EXPENSIVE BUSINESS

ALTHOUGH OFFICIALLY estimated at **£3.4bn, costs imposed on the trusts as their share of the £12.4bn outlay for the programme are likely to turn out much higher. In 2005 alone, a report from the Management Consultancies Association revealed, they spent £375m on consultants to help them introduce what systems were installed. And the expense was limited to this figure only because the programme was woefully behind schedule. If it ever gets near to *delivering* what it should, fees imposed on cash-strapped trusts will run into several billions.**

It doesn't stop there. The biggest cost of overhauling the IT in any organization is usually getting the people using it capable of doing so. In the health service this means training hard-pressed administrators and clinicians – no small undertaking, as Sir John Pattison recognised back in 2003. "There are recent articles indicating that other health care systems... are investing six times the amount in training than they are in the IT systems themselves, and it will have to be of that sort of order if you take the true costs into account", he told a parliamentary committee. With £6.2bn worth of systems planned, some observers estimated that the final cost of the programme could run to £40bn, dwarfing official estimates.

Speculation over total cost, which Granger had originally put at £2.3bn, was further fuelled when in May 2006 Lord Warner, the health minister who had taken over form Lord Hunt after he resigned over Iraq, told the *Financial Times* that it would hit £20bn, though he insisted this included the £1bn a year the NHS would be spending anyway on IT over the decade covered by the programme. Even so, an extra £10bn was hardly what the NHS needed as a 2005/06 deficit of half a billion pounds was forcing desperate cost-cutting, thousands of job losses and ward closures.

By the end of 2006 at least £2bn had been shelled out. Around £1bn had gone to the core suppliers, the balance in central running costs and spending by trusts.

RECORD RESPONSE

SERIOUS OBJECTIONS **to a gamble on this scale began to emerge from the clinicians whose patients' records would be at the mercy of the national care record service. The British Medical Association, alarmed that medical histories could quickly be loaded onto the untested national "spine", demanded that patients be asked for their consent before placing personal details that might include mental health history, HIV status, drug problems or anything else on a system outside the control of their GP.**

Back in May 2002, as the National Programme was being conceived, the *Eye*'s MD had pointed out the centralization of authority over medical records under 2001 legislation stipulating: "The secretary of state may... make such provision for... regulating the processing of prescribed patient information for medical purposes as he considers necessary or expedient (a) in the interests of patient care, or (b) in the public interest". A national database of health records, with no awkward GPs standing as gatekeepers between the authorities and the patient's records, would give this law teeth. Soon the chairman of the government's Care Record Development Board was warning of "considerable pressure to obtain access to data on the NHS Care Records Service from other government departments, public services such as the police and immigration services, and researchers".

The medics' trifling concerns over security and confidentiality were dismissed by Warner and Granger in familiar style. Sticking to plans for "implied consent" – under which everybody would be assumed to agree to their records going on the national spine – the health minister patronised the doctors by insisting that "good sense will prevail with the profession". Granger, preferring outright offence even when his project needed all the friends it could find, later likened the BMA to the National Union of Mineworkers.

Unlike the NUM, however, the doctors eventually secured a partial victory. A campaign in the *Guardian* exposed the threat to security from a system accessible to 250,000 users in the NHS – not to mention other government agencies, private investigators and resourceful hacks – and for which the promised "sealed envelope" technology allowing patients to guard certain information from general access was a long way from reality. The paper helpfully

A PROGRAMME NO ONE NEEDED

EVEN the government had no evidence that centrally held health records accessible anywhere in the country were needed.

Official accounts of the National Programme for IT curiously don't explain why it was needed. The closest to a justification for the central element – the national care record – comes in the form of a case study on Connecting for Health's website:

A 70-year-old lady called Jayne with a hip problem has been put on new medication by her GP. "She then goes to stay with her daughter 50 miles away. She's happy to make the trip, safe in the knowledge that, should she fall ill, local doctors will have all the information they need about her health, because she now has an NHS Electronic Care Record which can be shared between clinicians."

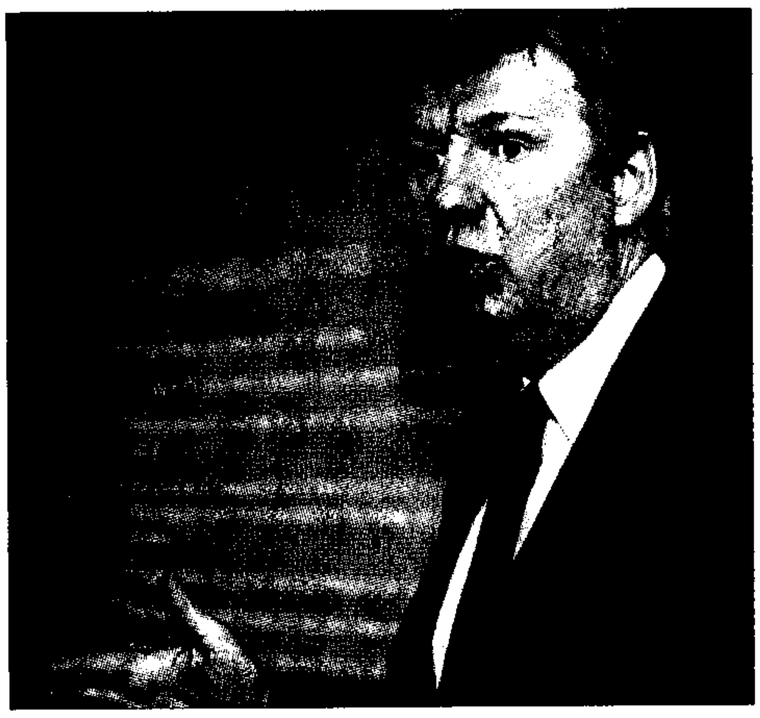
But how many 70-year-old ladies with bad hips are really waiting for a new NHS IT system before they will visit their relatives? What evidence was there, the Eye asked CfH, of the incidence of medical treatment away from a patient's local hospital or GP of the sort that would require immediate access to medical records anywhere in the country from a central database?

As it's the only rationale there is for the heart of the multi-billion pound programme, the reply bears repeating in all its verbiage: "The Electronic Record Development and Implementation Programme was initiated as part of Information for Health (a programme of the NHS Information Authority to explore the issues associated with the development and implementation of a variety of electronic patient record systems in different contexts), and was designed to provide early experience and feedback on the implementation of electronic health records. The programme was subject to continuous evaluation with the aim of capturing and sharing all the lessons learned from the sites, of which there are many examples from across England. The National Audit Office report on the National Programme highlighted the patient safety benefits of electronic health records."

In other words, there was never any evidence of need or demand for central healthcare records. As one GP campaigning against the system put it: "A national database is not essential... other mechanisms exist for the sharing of relevant information between directly involved health professionals."

"Other mechanisms" such as, er, email, telephone and fax!

£12.4bn WOULD PAY FOR...
500,000 full courses of herceptin treatment for cancer patients



GAFFE: Chief medical officer Liam Donaldson

printed a cut-out coupon to send to Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt demanding an opt-out from the system, thousands of which soon arrived in her in-tray.

Hewitt immediately told the coupon-fillers they had no chance unless they could show "unique and personal reasons for claiming substantial and unwarranted distress". Chief Medical Officer Liam Donaldson was even more high-handed, demanding that GPs forward letters addressed to them to the Department of Health without the individual's permission, a move the BMA called "an astonishingly incompetent gaffe". Within days, however, the government had backtracked as its Patient Record Taskforce recommended explicitly asking patients for consent to upload their details, giving them the right to refuse.

That this obvious concern had not been addressed at the outset of the programme once again betrayed the failure to ask the crucial questions about what the NHS and its patients wanted before drawing up multi-billion pound contracts. Firms bidding for the contracts in 2003 had even been told: "A patient will not be able to refuse to make their personal data available to the Spine." Nobody, it seems, had bothered to ask whether that was ethically, politically or even legally feasible.

AWKWARD QUESTIONS

THE SAVING GRACE of the National Programme for IT since day one has been the concern shown by many IT and health professionals and a few journalists. Something of the true state of the programme has emerged from the scrutiny of *Computer Weekly* and the close monitoring and analysis on the website e-Health Insider, on which postings from many a techie have given glimpses of the developing fiasco. By 2005 there was even a book on the programme, a comprehensive study called *"The NHS IT Project"* by health IT consultant Sean Brennan.

As it became clear that the National Programme was falling far short of its promises on both delivery and performance on the little that was delivered, a number of serious voices began to be raised in opposition.

As early as May 2004, soon after the contracts had been signed, a group of the UK's leading IT academics wrote to the Commons' Health Select Committee pointing out that "the NHS National Program for IT is starting to show many of the symptoms displayed by large IT and business change projects that have failed in the past... Our professional opinion is that a constructive, independent review is urgently needed."

TURNING ON THE SPIN CYCLE

A PROJECT on the scale of the NHS National Programme for IT needs all the scrutiny it can get – but the programme's leaders preferred news management, avoiding awkward questions in favour of pumping out their own misleading information.

- In December 2002 Richard Granger told a conference of suppliers looking to bid on the programme that any who criticised it could be banned from NHS work for 10 years.
- Critical journalists were shunned by Connecting for Health. A Computer Weekly hack was physically blocked by a Department of Health press officer from a January 2005 press conference on the programme given by then health minister John Hutton, who duly escaped any tricky questions.
- Requests for details of the Downing Street meeting at which the scheme was conceived were refused.
- Straightforward requests from Private Eye for information on costs and payments propping up suppliers were only replied to after six months, more than 20 reminders and the intervention of the Information Commissioner. Richard Granger declared himself "the senior manager responsible for the efficient and effective operation of [freedom of information] within NHS CfH".
- Repeated parliamentary questions on spending under the National Programme were all answered without mentioning the cost of running the programme and the hidden "advance payments" to suppliers.
- Various surveys on the National Programme were deftly spun. One unfavourable MORI study was sat on for months until after the National Audit Office reported. A survey for Medix showed that only 5 per cent of doctors felt they had been personally consulted. For CfH, that became an achievement that "suggests some 4,500 doctors have been personally consulted". Marvellous!
- Fifty million patients in England have provided great opportunities to spout figures suggesting the programme is delivering. In October 2006 Lord Warner announced a "significant milestone for healthcare" as the millionth appointment was made under choose and book. The rate was only 70 per cent off the target but who cares? A million's a big number! Similarly, much was made of the millions of electronic prescriptions allegedly made. In fact only 1.5 per cent have so far been received electronically by pharmacists as envisaged.
- Pressed on the lack of progress on the National Programme by the Public Accounts Committee in June 2006, Granger pleaded: "It is a very ambitious programme... I thought it would be a big risk from day one". Could this be the same blasé Granger who told a conference in March 2003: "It is misleading to say that the scale is bigger than has ever been done before. The extra spending of £2.3bn over three years is not such a terrifyingly large project – it is comparable to other mid-size projects in industry and government that are regularly completed on time"? It certainly could.
- As the scale of the disaster unfolded at the end of 2006, Granger responded not by addressing the fundamental flaws but by bringing in a PR team from Bell Pottinger, headed by the firm's crisis management specialist.

The calls went unheeded and only in April 2006 did the group get an official audience with CfH, following which an agreed statement appeared on CfH's website declaring "agreement that a constructive and pragmatic independent review of the programme could be valuable" – just as the academics had understood. In true CfH style, however, as the political heat was turned up on the project this was removed and replaced with a statement that offered no prospect of a review.

Such covering-up became the norm as New Labour moved to deny the escalating fiasco. Health Secretary Patricia Hewitt was reported to have called the scrutiny of the project by computer journalists "unhelpful". Lord Warner insisted "we are not going to be deflected by naysayers from any quarter" – even, it seemed, when those naysayers knew what they were talking about.

NAO COMMENT

THE BIG HOPE for critics who could see billions of pounds on their way down the drain was a National Audit Office report due out early in 2006. But when the report finally appeared in June, despite the appalling lack of progress on the programme and the concerns of everybody who knew anything about it, the auditors had managed to produce what one MP described as "easily the most gushing" of the 62 NAO reports he had read. They had swallowed all CfH's boasts whilst barely looking at the failures, only cursorily consulting trusts and GPs and ignoring the years that the programme was behind schedule.

Even the rushed procurement process was commended for its speed, despite the disastrous foundations that it had hastily built for the programme. Claims from a helpful consultancy firm called Ovum that billions of pounds had been saved from the centralisation of the project (later strongly disputed by experts) were meekly accepted. Not even an eyebrow was raised over Ovum's conflicts of interest in counting the lucky contract winners among its clients.

Perhaps the only useful information to emerge from the NAO report, three and a half years after the launch of the National Programme for IT, was an official price for the whole deal: an eye-watering £12.4bn, or more than five times the figure given by Granger three years earlier.

Among the likely explanations for the NAO whitewash was that a senior member of CfH had accompanied the auditors every step of the way. The delay arose from debate between the auditors and CfH over what should be in the report, under the very British arrangement whereby the facts have to be agreed by the audited public body. As rumours filtered out that Granger had bullied the NAO into its glowing testimony, Auditor General Sir John Bourne admitted that "of course one side argued with the other", but insisted his people had stood their ground.

Sir John's protestations became less convincing a few weeks later when the BBC uncovered a first draft of the report after disgruntled NAO insiders "suggested" that reporters ask for it under Freedom of

£12.4bn WOULD PAY FOR...
Reversing 20 years' worth of planned cuts in social care budget

Information laws. Several damning statements had mysteriously failed to make the final cut, including the auditors' findings that the Department of Health had been "slow to demonstrate clear and effective leadership to engage NHS organisations", and the worrying diagnosis of a whole section including the line "the NHS currently lacks the sufficient skills" to make the scheme a success. Nor was there space in the final report for a view that would have provided critics with deadly ammunition: "the confidentiality of patient information may be at risk". The companies were protected too, as whole paragraphs detailing sanctions against BT and its problems with its software supplier were deleted.

None of this was seen by the Commons public accounts committee (PAC) that convened days after the NAO report; nor was a damning survey on the programme commissioned by CfH months before and sat on until well after they had met. Members of the committee were reduced to expressing incredulity at the generosity of the NAO's judgment while a couple of critical witnesses, Dr Nowlan and Professor Hutton, complained of how the lack of clinical involvement set the programme off on the wrong foot. That provoked Granger into spouting statistics about achievements on peripheral aspects of the scheme – neatly deflecting the committee, just as he had the NAO auditors, from the central failures. It was left to Hutton to cut through the smokescreen: "I do not doubt that all those things have been delivered, but they are nothing to do with the NHS care record which is a central repository of key information of each person that is available anywhere within the NHS..."

Granger chose to mislead the committee on the crucial question of the central care record available nationwide. After CfH officials had repeatedly evaded the issue, PAC chairman Edward Leigh demanded: "Is my GP able to send my records to a hospital from London up to an accident I have in Middlesbrough or somewhere? Is that now happening?" As the care record service which the MP was asking about was nowhere near availability, the correct answer would have been "No". Instead Granger answered: "Yes, he can do that because for the first time the NHS has a reliable network of over 14,000 end points on it which are available almost all the time". It might have seemed a smart reply at the time, but by pointing out that the standard e-mail system could be used for this purpose, Granger had in fact just delivered devastating proof of why the National Care Record, the core system that would realise Blair's original vision for healthcare information and the reason for the £12.4bn project in the first place, was always completely unnecessary.

Two days later at Prime Minister's Questions, more than four years after he had called for the National Programme, Blair was forced by Richard Bacon MP to answer for it for the first time. "Let me explain to him why it is important that we have that information technology programme", replied the PM, "In the end, one of the huge benefits of having a national health service is that we can have electronic patient records that are transferable right round the system". Forty-eight hours after Granger had shown why a multi-billion pound programme wasn't needed for this, nobody had bothered to tell the Prime Minister.

MELTDOWN

ALTHOUGH THE NAO had vowed to keep an eye on the project, few experts would trust the auditors again to stand up to those running the National Programme.

In September last year Public Accounts Committee members Richard Bacon and John Pugh published a paper declaring that "The National Programme for IT in the NHS is currently sleepwalking towards disaster... clinical staff are losing confidence in it. Many local trusts are considering opting out of the programme altogether. These problems are a consequence of over-centralisation, over-ambition and an obsession with quick political fixes." Their prescription – "to create a proper balance between central standards and central procurement where this offers demonstrable benefits, and local autonomy and responsibility" – was what had been recommended five years before but had been steam-rollered by Granger's procurement process.

The British Computer Society issued a paper recommending much the same. A Medix survey found that two-thirds of doctors didn't think their trusts' budgets could afford the programme's huge costs. Even Parliament's moribund Health Select Committee gave in to calls from academics to start its own belated enquiry. Then last month one of the big suppliers broke rank. Andrew Rollerson, in charge of Fujitsu's work on the programme, told a conference: "It isn't working. And it isn't going to work."

Meanwhile, Department of Health officials were frantically thinking of how to limit the damage. The department's new head, David Nicholson, set up an ongoing internal review and sought to pass as much responsibility down the chain as possible. Most observers hoped this was a prelude to a restructuring of the National Programme under which IT would be handled more effectively at local level to national standards before more billions are wasted.

Sensible remedial action already seems to have been scuppered by the programme's early failings, however. Having handed 10 year monopolies to the big suppliers, the government would face enormous compensation claims if it prevented them from milking the deals – a prospect that CfH refused to discuss with *Private Eye*.

WHAT NEXT? AN ANORAK WRITES...

THE *Eye* asked a leading IT specialist (who wants to remain anonymous) for his view on what went wrong and what needs to be done.

The fatal flaws of the National Programme for IT:

- It was launched without any evidence that hundreds of largely autonomous NHS organisations with their own IT would buy into one-size-fits-all systems imposed on them from Whitehall.
- No evidence has been produced that a nationally available electronic health record will work.
- Clinicians should have been consulted on what they really wanted from a large spend on NHS IT. Feasibility studies should have been published. If the scheme looked feasible by all independent assessments, only then should the National Programme have been announced. Instead it was conceived in secret and announced as a *fait accompli* – the worst possible way to engage clinicians.
- Assessments of the programme, such as gateway reviews by the Office of Government Commerce, have not been published. Some practitioners think this is because they show the programme to be deeply flawed.
- There has been no admission by any minister of the seriousness of the problems while the gap between optimistic ministerial statements on the programme and the reality, as perceived by NHS managers and clinicians is widening – turning even the programme's enthusiasts into sceptics.
- Those running the programme talk only about the specifics of what is going well, and what can be delivered. Nobody mentions the big things that are going wrong, such as the reasons for the delayed core software. And nobody in authority wants to ask the question: will it ever work as originally conceived?

What should happen now?

- A ministerial admission that the programme is mired in delay, and doubts over costs and technical feasibility. A problem that is not admitted cannot readily be tackled.
- Nobody yet knows that the idea of a nationally available electronic health record system will work in the way it has been configured. So an independent published review is a must.
- Trusts and GPs should have the authority to make their own choice of IT systems and suppliers as long as they meet nationally agreed standards. That way they'll want what they install rather than having it foisted on them.
- Money given to trusts for upgrading IT should be ring-fenced – earmarked only for specific IT projects. There would then be no need for a huge central bureaucracy which monitors what trusts and suppliers are doing.

and, er... that's IT

The plan to transform NHS information technology is deep in the sh-IT. Responsibility goes all the way to a Prime Minister who was keener to listen to management consultants than medics as long as he got his bumper initiative. His government handed the task to a consultant who ignored intelligent analysis of the National Health Service's true needs in favour of big announcements, spin and deceit. The result was very predictable, and very New Labour.

Letter from **Tehran**

from Our Own Correspondent

WHEN Washington wanted to invade Iraq, officials used just the kind of language now so familiar to us in Iran. Is the prospect of imminent catastrophe the subject of frenzied debate in our media? Happily, the world looks slightly different on our state television news, which contents itself with America's woes in Iraq and the horror more generally of life in the western world. As Jimmy Carter said at a state dinner hosted by the late Shah the year before our revolution in 1979, Iran is – officially – "an island of stability" in a troubled region.

Our National Security Council sent a formal directive last year to all journalists and media forbidding negative reporting of Iran's disagreement with the West over nuclear issues. Ali Abtahi, a former deputy president in more moderate times, wrote in his blog recently that in contrast to the escalating tension and media focus Iran is receiving overseas, inside the country nothing seems more remote than the prospect of war or sanctions.

Iran's rulers take great care to control what ordinary people know of the world outside and how it perceives us. In the past ten years more than 100 publications, including 42 dailies, have been closed down. Now attention is turning to more modern forms of free speech. Persian is a surprisingly popular language for online journals; as the medium has grown, so have efforts to control it. Bloggers have been jailed and last September officials proudly announced that "more than 10 million websites were filtered" or blocked in Iran.

Even the humble mobile phone text message has not escaped the authorities' anger. During the presidential election in 2005, the judiciary threatened to prosecute those who sent texts with the aim of "denigrating" candidates. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who emerged victorious and is now steering us towards Armageddon, was even quoted as saying: "I have the addresses and phone numbers of those who have slandered me."

It is a clumsy policy that generates its own humour: "They ask an American, an Ethiopian and an Iranian, can you share with us your opinions about meat rationing. The Ethiopian responds, "What is meat?"; the American says, "What is rationing?"; the Iranian asks, "What is an opinion?".

Our President is, of course, just the kind of foreigner Americans and others far away love to hate. Yet despite his puffed up persona in the West, his position at home looks precarious. After only 18 months in power, last December Ahmadinejad suffered a twin humiliation at municipal polls and elections for the Assembly of Experts, which has powers to appoint our Supreme Leader. The President has failed to make good his promises to revive the economy, and his foreign policy posturing has done him few favours. Ahmadinejad allies failed to win control of any local councils.

The electorate's disappointment appeared to have been shared by our clerical elite. In the Byzantine network of government agencies in Iran, a 12-member Guardian Council oversees all elections. In the past it has generally used its powers of veto to exclude progressive candidates. On this occasion, many candidates linked to Ahmadinejad and his guru Mesbah-Yazdi were also barred. Those who were allowed to stand did badly, leaving the President's supporters lacking significant influence in the Assembly.

But Ahmadinejad's real problem, perhaps, is that with his dishevelled looks and vacant demeanour he is just too funny to take seriously. Our leading – and recently exiled – satirist Ebrahim Nabavi says that conversations in Iran's communal taxis would go something like this: "When Rafsanjani was in power in the early 1990s, our leaders were all thieves; then under Khatami they were useless; now, with Ahmadinejad, they are all mad."

FUNNY OLD WORLD

COMPILED BY **VICTOR LEWIS-SMITH**

● "Japanese shoppers use over thirty billion plastic shopping bags each year," a spokesman for the Triumph International lingerie company told a press conference in Tokyo, "and most of them are simply thrown away after a single journey home. In terms of resources needed to produce them, that amounts to the contents of two giant oil tankers being thrown away each year, and the planet cannot continue with such wastage. Plastic shopping bags also lead to trash disposal problems and increased CO_2 emissions, and there are urgent calls from politicians to reduce their usage. Which is why we are now launching the 'Reji-Bukuro Bra' ('No Shopping Bag Bra'), the world's first environmentally-friendly underwear.

"When the Reji-Bukuro is being worn, the shopping bag portions are folded away inside the bra cups, where they serve as extra padding. But when the wearer needs to carry purchases, she can simply remove her bra at the checkout, and convert it into a large shopping bag by connecting the hooks on the bra's underwire and extending the bag portions to their full size. The lace cups serve as decoration, as do the shoulder straps, which are tied to the top of the bag as ribbons. The Reji-Bukuro is available in red, blue, green, yellow, and pink, and because it is made from the Teijin Group's ECOPET brand of polyester fibre (which has been recycled from plastic bottles), it is 100% environmentally friendly too." *(Resource Recovery Forum, 17/11/06. Spotter: John Gower)*

– ● –

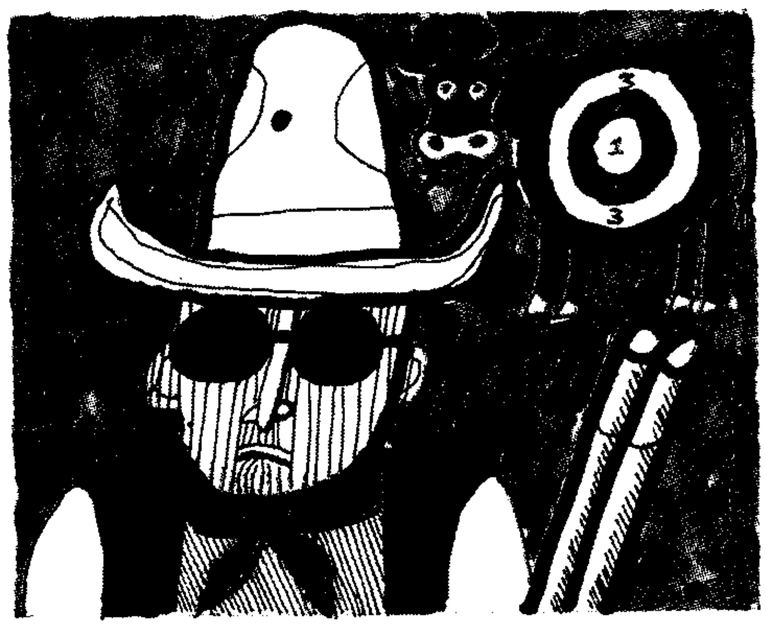
● *King Malembe the Doctor is challenging everyone who has been trying to get help but without success, and who is looking for help with the following problems:*

Has your boy/girlfriend/wife/husband left or divorced you for someone else? Need him/her to come back? Is your loved one having an affair? Want him/her to be yours only? Early ejaculation, low erection, unwanted pregnancy? Problem with exams, interviews, or fired? Need your boss to call you back, no matter what happened?

Luck for casino and money. Bad breath. Very serious court cases. Bad acne. Do you tremble? Do you pass urine while sleeping, are you blacklisted? Get any amount of money you want in 5 days only by using magic stick. Get all 6 numbers correct at once. Get a man/woman of your dreams by using Bee Nest Powder to unite families. Struggling to get bail? Drinking problems and more. Call the King Malembe the Doctor now for help 076 244 2498. (False Bay Echo, 23/11/06. Spotter: Dr Brian Keefe)

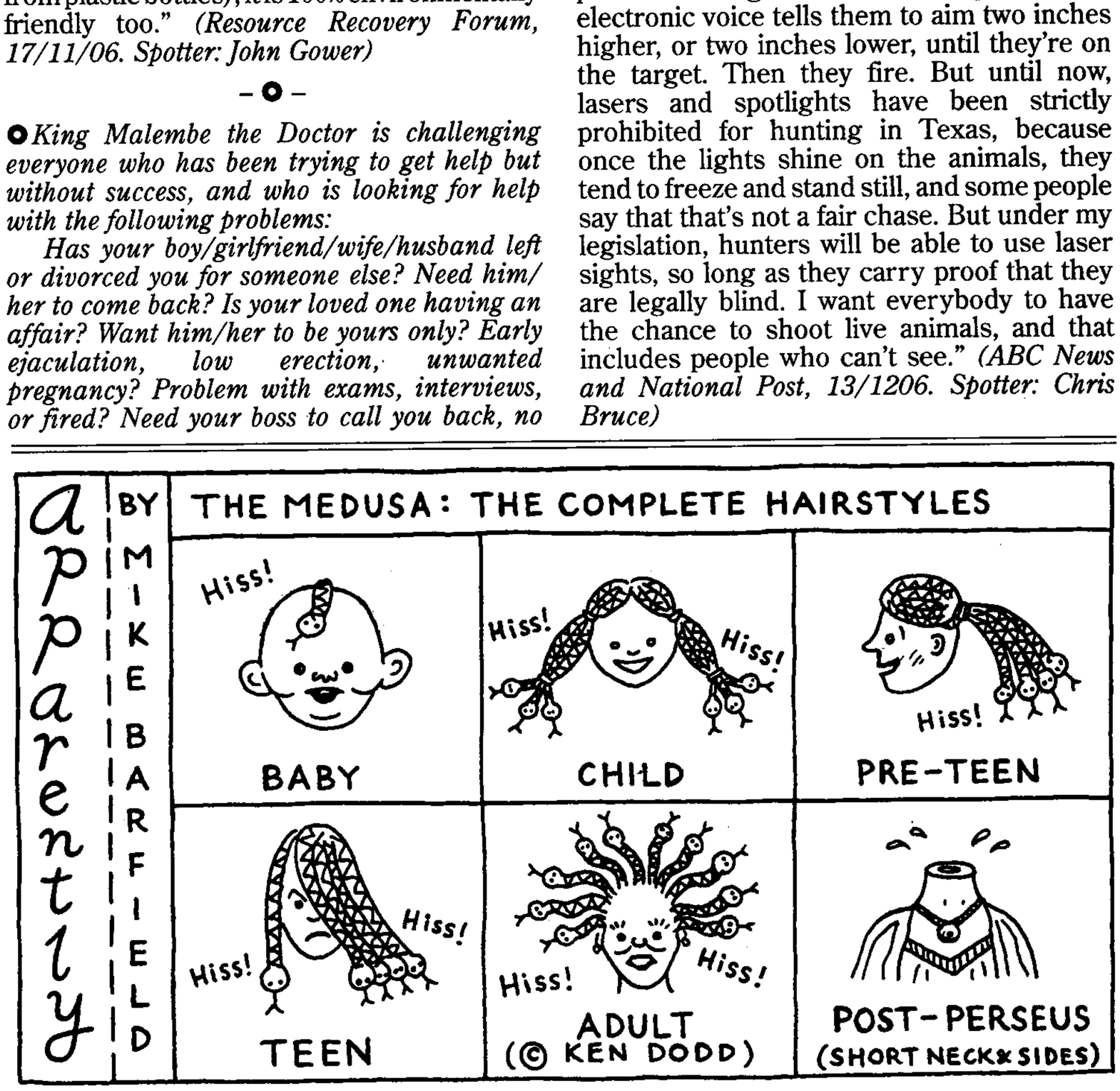
– ● –

● "Texas likes to call itself a firearm-friendly state," Republican Representative Edmund Kuempel told reporters in Austin, "yet it discriminates against blind people. At present, the visually impaired are only allowed to hunt with the aid of a sighted person, but my bill will give them greater freedom by allowing them to take advantage of the latest technology. If the Legislature



passes my measure, it will open up the fun of hunting to the legally blind, and I think that's great.

"I've already seen how it works on television, when blind people take target practice. The gun has a laser sight, and an electronic voice tells them to aim two inches higher, or two inches lower, until they're on the target. Then they fire. But until now, lasers and spotlights have been strictly prohibited for hunting in Texas, because once the lights shine on the animals, they tend to freeze and stand still, and some people say that that's not a fair chase. But under my legislation, hunters will be able to use laser sights, so long as they carry proof that they are legally blind. I want everybody to have the chance to shoot live animals, and that includes people who can't see." *(ABC News and National Post, 13/1206. Spotter: Chris Bruce)*



ST ALBION PARISH NEWS

Incumbent: Rev A.R.P. Blair MA (Oxon)

Hullo!

And my first and final point is to let you all know just how the parish is going to look by the end of next week when all my new initiatives have been put into place.

1. I am not mad!

2. Whoever says I am mad is clearly mad themselves and faces a long term of custodial imprisonment in one of the many prisons that Dr Reid tells me he has built in the vestry.

3. The St Albion's Cottage Hospital will remain open 48 hours a day, eight days a week, until every patient has been cured of bird flu!

4. I pledge that no one will ever again have to wait for more than 78 weeks before being seen by a cleaning lady and given their own trolley to sleep on.

5. And talking of trolleys, I am certainly not off mine, but if you want to know someone who is, you need look no further than Mr Brown, who wanders around the parish thinking he's the vicar! How mad is that? Think about it!

6. From now on there will be zero tolerance for the use of firearms anywhere in the Roy Hattersley housing estate or the Tesco car park. And when I say 'zero', I mean 'zero'! Can I say fairer than that?

7. Hey, look out the window. Can you see any gun crime? Of course you can't! Because there isn't any! It's all been sorted, thanks to my initiatives!

8. So, ok, there **is** one thing that people have a perfect right to complain about and which I won't try to conceal (because, as everyone knows, I'm a pretty straight kind of guy). The parish accounts are in a pretty shocking state. But, hey, that's hardly my fault, is it? I would have had an initiative to sort this out a long time ago, but then I didn't want to hurt Gordon's feelings!

Because, as everyone knows, I'm not just a pretty straight kind of a guy... I'm a pretty nice, straight kind of a guy – though I'm not "a pretty straight kind of a gay" , as our friend Mr Mandelson likes to joke!

9. It's time for my medication now and my session on the exercise bike, because I'm also A PRETTY FIT, NICE, STRAIGHT (AND NOT AT ALL MAD) KIND OF A GUY.

10. I think I can feel the hand of history on my shoulder, and a voice is saying, "Come along, vicar, it's time for your lie-down". So before I go, I want you all to be ready to sing my new chorus at this week's evening service.

"He's a straight, straight, straight
kind of guy!
He's a great, great, great kind of guy!
He's a straight, straight, straight
kind of guy!
And he'd never, never, never,
Ever, ever, ever,
Never, never, never
Tell a lie!"

Lies and music T. Blair 2007
(Is this right? Ed.)

Ever yours!

Tony

The vicar in a recent portrait by another local artist Mr Russell who has recently moved into the area

Ave Margarita

The new statue designed by local artist Mr de la Nougerede

The Vicar was sadly unable to attend the consecration in the Iron Lady Chapel of a statue of one of my parish predecessors, the Blessed Margaret of Thatcher.

Unfortunately, I had an urgent appointment with my chiropodist, which had been arranged as long ago as that morning and it could not be rescheduled. The suggestion that I did not turn up because I did not wish to invite comparisons between my own ten years of achievement and her mere 11 years of clinging to power is neither funny nor clever.

There have already been reports of tears falling from the statue's eyes. If this miracle is indeed true, as I believe, it is surely a sign that the Holy image itself is weeping with distress at the thought of my imminent departure.

PS. When the time comes for my own giant effigy to be placed above the altar, there may not be room for Margaret's little statue as well, and I have cleared a space in the bike shed ready for its storage. T.B.

A Letter From The Rev. Dubya of the Church of the Latter-Day Morons

And, lo, there came upon the lands of Iraqiland a mighty surge, like unto no surge that has been seen before, no surgee!

That's what it says in the Scripture book, and that's what's going to happen! Yes, surgee!

But, what's this I hear, pardner?! Seems like one of the wagons has turned back east, scared of the Indians!

And is that a yellow stripe I see down the driver's back?!

Why, it's Reverend Tiny Bloom, taking his boys back home, just when the bugle was sounding loud and clear for the Big Surge!

Damn me, if the Rev. Tiny Tim wasn't surging backwards instead of forwards!

Well, don't think of showing your face around my town again, Tiny. We've got a word for folks like you – cut-and-runsters, we call them. And we know what to do with a cut-and-runster round these parts!

We've still got plenty of rope from the lynching of the Evil One, which was the best day out for the kids this town has known for a long time! Some of the old folks still talkin' about it!

Your ex-pardner,

Sheriff Dubya,
Serge City!

● Vicar's Note: Do not put this letter in, under any circumstances. The Rev. Dubya has clearly gone mad, unlike me, do you hear?

To Remember In Your Prayers

● Mr Kinnock, the firebrand Welsh preacher whom some older members of the congregation remember for the unforgettable eight-and-a-half hour sermon he preached at St Albion's in 1987 on the text, *"Totally, I believe, and utterly"* (which he then sang to us in his rich Welsh baritone). Mr Kinnock seems, alas, lately to have suffered something of a mental breakdown, as a result of all his years of failure in the ministry. May he learn the lessons of humility and gratitude, particularly to those of us who have looked after him in recent years, and without whose loyalty and support he would not be quaffing back vintage champagne in subsidised Continental restaurants (paid for by the parish!), but would still be shovelling coal down some dingy Welsh pit! Amen! T.B.

Thought For Lent

Lent is the time when, traditionally, you don't give up something. This year, as usual, I am not giving up being Vicar. Got that, Gordon? You can wait for forty days at least, okay? T.B.

A STATEMENT FROM MR PRESCOTT, OF THE WORKING MEN'S CLUB

'Good Value For Money'

I wish to make it clear to all members of the parish that, just because the Vicar has increasified my honorary stipendium to a modest £2,312,466 a year, this is a recognitude of my past hard work and contributions to the life of the parish, and does not mean that I am expectorated to perform any further servitudes in regard of the aforesaid financial emonuments. Let me remind you who it was who knocked heads together when Tony and Gordon were having one of their poncy, public-school tiffs, by having them round for a curry and a pint of ale. That's why I'm worth every penny of the 746 percent pay rise which Tony has awarded me, and I shall spend it in any way I like – i.e. on some new croquet mallets and saucy underwear for when I go visiting the ladies! And anyone who says otherwise can booger off. J.P.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW – THE GLITTERING PRATS OF 1987?

The Eye follows the fortunes of David Cameron's fellow members of the most elite dining society in the history of the world, Oxford's legendary Bullshittingdon Club

1 David 'Spliffy' Cameron, Old Etonian, now tipped to become Britain's next prime minister. Took a First in Public Relations and Media Studies at Snortnose College.

2 Boris 'Beano' Johnson, Old Etonian, now tipped to become the ex-editor of the Spectator. Read Comics at Cripeschurch College.

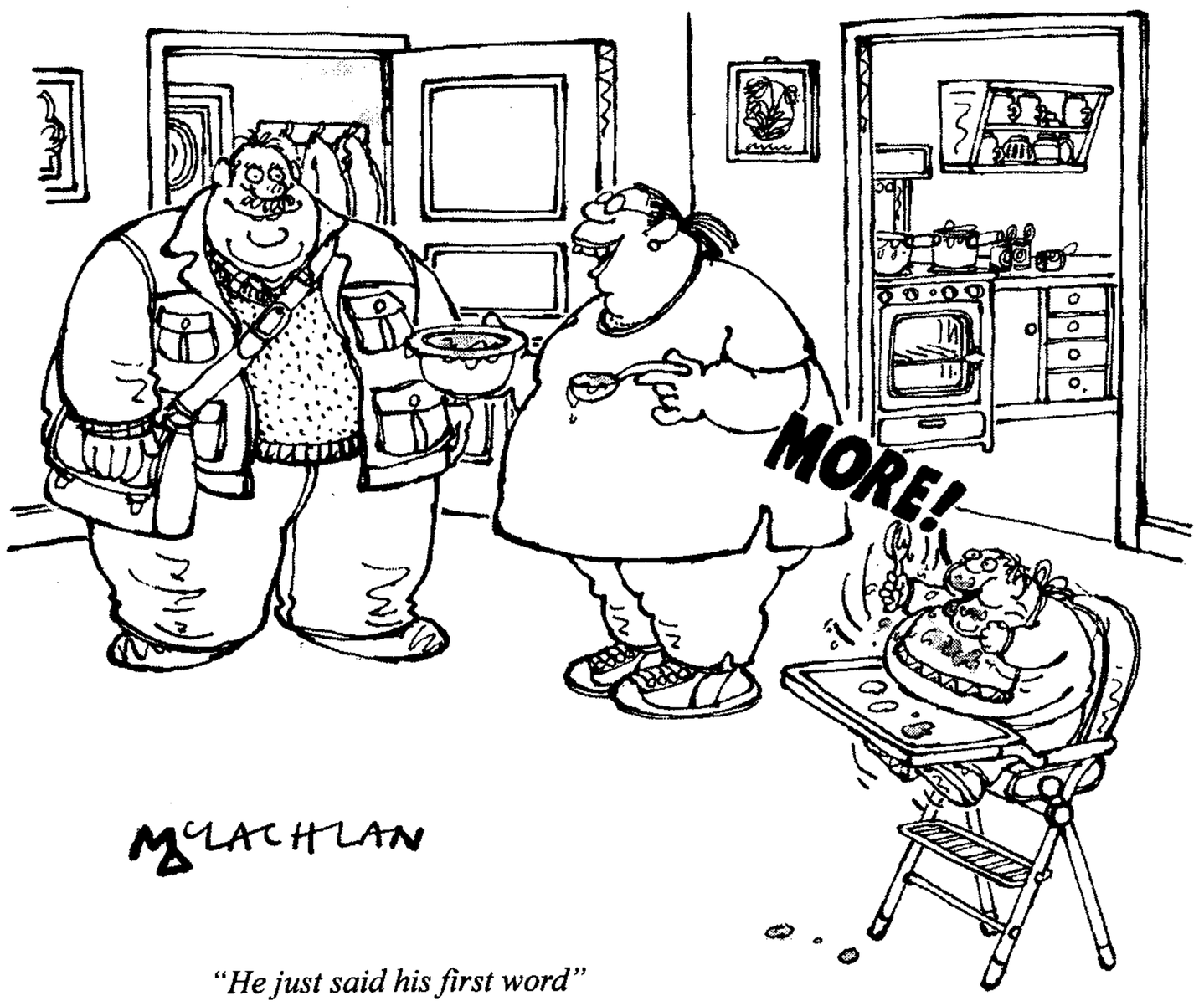
3 Augustus 'Gussy' Fink-Nottle, Old Etonian, son of Lord Hitbottle, now a hedge fund manager at Fink and Nottle (this year's bonus £700 billion).

4 Peregrine 'Perry' Starborgling, Old Etonian, son of merchant banker Sir Arthur Starborgling. Married heiress, the Hon. Poppy Moneypenny, sister of the Hon. Penny Moneypoppy. Now works for Starborgling Securities (Riyadh).

5 Rodney 'Dipso' Ricketson-Hatt, Old Etonian, was President of 'the Buller' while reading the wine menu at the Randolph Hotel. Set up a dotcom business, Sockittome.com, selling thermal footwear on the internet, but now lives in Tasmania, working as a landscape gardener.

6 Bartholomew 'Corby' Trouserpress, Old Etonian, now a senior partner in top City law firm Trouserpress, Trouserpress, Trouserpress and Chaudhuri. Read the Daily Telegraph at Lady Margaret Thatcher Hall.

7 Sebastian 'Pratt' Prattwinkle, known to his fellow Bullers as 'Oik' because he went to Westminster, not Eton. Started a restaurant 'The Guzzling Toad' in Trowbridge, Wiltshire, with family money, but now faces bankruptcy proceedings. Entered the Priory, where he shared a room with Jonny Knatchbull-Trumpington (President of Bullers 1984-5) and *(That's enough Prats. Ed.)*



"He just said his first word"

QUEEN INSISTS THAT CAMILLA GOES TO IRAQ

by Our Defence Correspondent **Brigadier Trumpington-Smythe**

HER Majesty the Queen personally intervened last night to ensure that the Duchess of Cornwall was sent to Iraq with her regiment, the Marlboro Lite Infantry ("the Gaspers").

The Duchess, 76, will take up duties clearing mines, defusing bombs and patrolling insurgent-held areas in Basra.

Army chiefs were initially hostile to Camilla's deployment in the front line, on the grounds that she might make a high-profile kidnap target.

But the Queen was insistent that the Duchess should do her duty and that it would be good for the troops' morale to have such a senior Royal "at the sharp end".

"Of course there are risks," said Her Majesty, "but in this case, they are well worth taking."

BECKETT DUPED BY 'IMPRESSIONIST'

by Our Political Staff **Mike Yarwood**

There was shock in Westminster yesterday when it was revealed that Mrs Margaret Beckett, the Foreign Secretary, was conned by a well-known TV impressionist, Tony Blair.

Blair rang her up pretending to be the Prime Minister and invited her to become the Foreign Secretary.

"But I don't know anything about Foreign Affairs" she is alleged to have said, at which point Tony Blair replied, "Exactly. That's why we want you for the job."

The Foreign Secretary clearly had no idea that she was being made a fool of, even though she said at one point, "You sound just like George Bush." Blair however laughed this off and continued with his prank.

Vote Rory

When confronted with the evidence that she had been tricked by Blair, she said: "I feel a caravan holiday is ideal for a woman my age."

But last night, friends rallied behind the Foreign Secretary saying, "Blair is a well-known hoaxer and famous for pretending to be someone else. He has fooled millions with his comedy programme 'Blair, Bush and Misfortune', so it's hardly Margaret's fault that she made a complete idiot of herself."

An Apology

IN COMMON with all other newspapers, we may have given the impression that the England v. Ireland Rugby International at Croke Park was bound to result in violent protest, likely bloodshed and possible multiple fatalities. Headlines such as "Black and Fans", "Sunday Bloody Rugby" and "Field of Death" may have reinforced the impression that the forthcoming Six Nations fixture might have revived memories of the unfortunate incident in 1921. (Please check, sub with degree.)

We now realise that there was not a scintilla of truth in the above and there was never any doubt that the match would be played in a friendly spirit and that the Irish crowd would give a spirited rendering of "God Save The Queen", as they congratulated the English team on their magnificent defeat.

© All newspapers.

Join the Big Match debate on *bigmatchdebate@telegraph.co.uk* or tell us what you think of the debate so far on *debatesofar@telegraph.co.uk* or possibly don't bother on *dontbother@telegraph.co.uk*.

GLENDA AT THE OSCARS

SHE'S THE "QUEEN" OF FLEET STREET!!

■ **HELEN MIRREN!?? Aren't-chasickofher?!! You can't open a paper or turn on your telly without seeing Dame Helen a-grinnin' and a-winnin!?! Well, listen up, Damey, you're *not* the Queen and never will be – you're nothin' more than a bit part player in a two-bit movie!?!! Prime Suspect for givin' yourself airs 'n' graces??!! It's you, Helen Mirren – guilty as charged!?!! Now clear off!?!!**

■ HATS – or rather crowns – off to Helen Mirren!!?! As the old song says, "There's Nothing Like A Dame"!!?! OK, she won't see sixty again (who will?!?) but this gorgeous, glamorous goddess of the screen is the Oscar Windsor for me!?! (Geddit?!) I·tell you what – who needs Queen Elizabeth when we've got Queen Helen!?!! All together now – "God Save Our Gracious Dame"!!?!

■ **DAME Judi Dench!?! Aren't-chasickofher!?! You can't open a paper or turn on your telly without seeing Dame Judi a-schmoozin' and a-losin'?!?! No wonder you didn't get an Oscar, Damey – you're not Helen Mirren and you never will be!?!**

■ DAME JUDI?!? Don'tchaluvher!?! Tell you what – she's a *real* actress, not just someone going round pretending to be the Queen!?! Here's Glenda's Notes On The Biggest Scandal Of All – why didn't brilliant Dame Judi win instead of clapped-out old Helen Mirren?!?! *(This is terrible. Keep going. Ed.)*

■ **DAME Richard and Dame Judy??! Aren'tchasickofthem?!? I'm not. Hats off to both of them!?!**

■ *HERE THEY are – Glenda's Mad March Munchkins!?!*

● **Gilbert and George!?!!** OK, so they are a couple of old queens (unlike Helen Mirren!?!) and obsessed with poo. You can't have everything in this life!!?!!

Byeeee!!!

RALPH FIENNES FLIES UNDONE

(surely 'Qantas'? Ed)

CAMERON CHOOSES STATE SECTOR

by Our Education Staff **Faith School**

THE leader of the Conservative Party, Mr Cameron, surprised supporters yesterday by announcing that he is to send his children to a local Church of England primary school.

"I deliberately chose a non-fee-paying school," he told reporters, "because I don't want my children to end up in the sort of place where they meet the wrong type of people, get in with a bad crowd and end up smoking pot behind the Fives Court after the Wall Game with Pongo Twytte-Harrison and the Sultan of Kuoni."

David Cameron continued, "I want to send my children to a school where, when I ask them what they did today, they don't reply 'Marijuana and cocaine, Dad', or even 'That's a private matter, Pater, old bean and you are quite wrong to bring it up'."

Late News

CAMERON 'HIGHER' THAN BROWN

THE NEWS that David Cameron is ahead of Gordon Brown in the latest Guardian opinion poll was greeted calmly by the Conservative leader. "Mmm... I'm mellow and kinda relaxed on that one..." he said, "cool... anyone got any Sugar Puffs? I've got the munchies?"

"Let us pray that our kids get into the Church school"

Andrew Neil's Desert Island Disc Choices In Full

1. **Brown Girl In The Photo** Boney M
2. **Simply The Vest** Tina Turner
3. **The Lady Is In Tramps** Frank Sinatra
4. **Sunday Bloody Sunday Times** U2
5. **St Matthew D'Ancona Passion** Johann Sebastian Bachlay-Brothers
6. **Is This The Way To I'm A Brillo?** Tony Christie
7. **Pad!** Michael Jackson
8. **Brown EYE Girl** Van Morrison *(You've done this one. Ed.)*

WIMBLEDON EQUALITY CALL

by our Wimbledon correspondent **Maria Sharapovphwoarr!**

MALE PLAYERS at Wimbledon have demanded to be on an equal footing with their female counterparts after it was revealed that women players receive substantially more pictures in the Daily Telegraph and the Mail than them.

"No matter how well we play, the front page of these paper will always be full of long-legged Russian blondes in tiny micro-skirts," complained world number one Roger Federer. "It doesn't matter if one of them gets dumped out in straight sets in the first round, they'll always receive substantially more photos than me."

The newspaper editors rejected the complaints, saying they would give an equal amount of space to the male players. Just as long as those male players were blonde, leggy, Russian and female.

MOSLEMS LOSE FIGHT TO WEAR BOMBS ON TUBE

by Our Legal Staff
Michael Burqa and Niqab Ross

AFTER a challenge in the High Court, a 16-year-old schoolboy from Dewsbury, Yorks, was told that it was not an infringement of his human rights to be told to take off his explosive rucksack before using public transport.

The boy, Osama bin Ladenwithbombs, cannot be named for legal reasons but plans to appeal.

(Reuters)

A Doctor Writes

AS A DOCTOR, I am often asked, "Will the NHS computer transform the Health Service as we know it?"

The simple answer is GP FAULT 0847x6... bugger... how do I get out of this this this this? Where's the number of the IT bloke? ... FATAL EXCEPTION 0D... INVALID PAGE FAULT... STOP: 0xC0000221 STATUS_IMAGE_ CHECKSUM_MISMATCH.

© A. Doctor 2007.

DIANA STATUE UNVEILED

the PREMIERSH*TS

Advertisement

The New Overly Sexualised Doll for Kids

BRITZ™

comes complete with:

- **Shaved head**
- **Tattoos**
- **Drink problem**
- **No knickers**

Hours of fun as you make Britz disintegrate in front of your very own eyes! Press the button and hear Britz cry for help! Or add the following accessories for even more entertainment – two children under 5! Wicked!

Price: Rehab

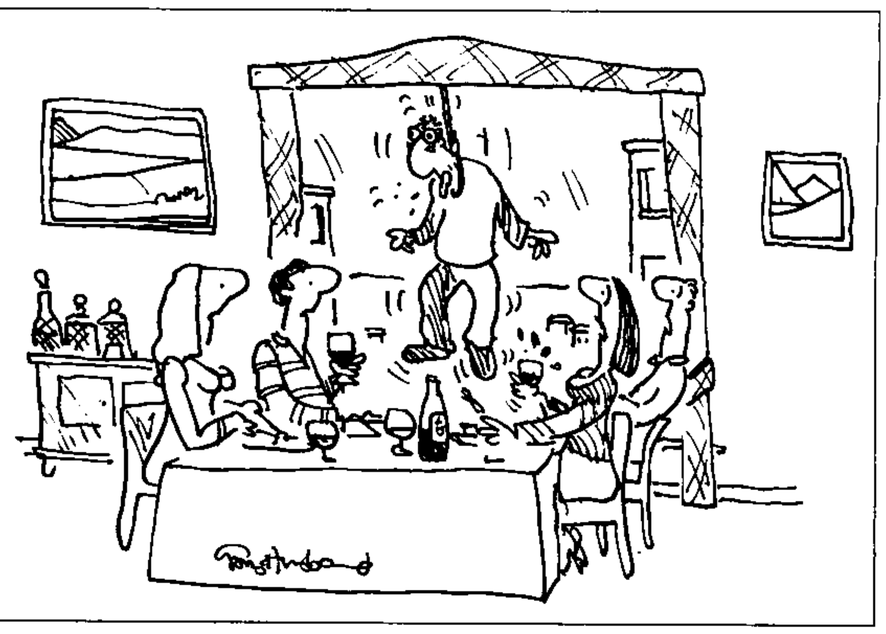
OSCAR FOR 'QUEEN'

by Our Showbusiness Staff
Lunchtime O'Drivel

LIZ WINDSOR, 82, last night won an Oscar for her role playing the Queen of England.

"It is an astonishing performance," said the Academy Award citation. "Everything is totally convincing – the accent, the clothes, the waving. It's as if she had been born to play the part." *(Cont. p. 94)*

"Oh, that's John from the apartment upstairs. His wife left him recently... it's all a bit sordid, apparently..."



Eye Spring Quiz

One of these two men has been arrested for possession of cannabis.

Was it:

a) Tory Leader Dave "Spliffy" Cameron, 39?

b) Yobin Hoodie, 17?

■*Winners receive a free night out with the Bullingdon Club!*

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam
Ray Evans, lyricist

So. Farewell
Then Ray
Evans,
Legendary songwriter.

"Che sera sera."
That was your
Greatest hit.

All together now –
"Che sera sera,
Whatever will be
Will be."

Or rather –
"Whatever has been
Has been."

E.J. Thribb (17½)

THATCHER STATUE

THEN

NOW

'OUR JOB IS DONE'

Blair Hails British Victory In Iraq As Our Boys Fly Home

by Our Man In Southern Iraq BAZRA BOMBINGBOYE

A JUBILANT Tony Blair stepped out into Downing Street last night to tell waiting newsmen that the nation should "Rejoice! Rejoice!"

"We have done the job we set out to do," said the Prime Minister, "and now it is time for the troops to come home.

"Just look at what we have achieved," Mr Blair went on. "The people of Basra are at last free to walk the streets shooting each other without any fear of interference.

"People can once again drive their cars full of explosives anywhere they like to blow up anyone they choose.

"Sewage is once again flowing openly in the streets, and electricity supplies are guaranteed not to work.

"Hospitals are full and schools are empty – what more could anyone wish?

"And all this has been achieved," explained a jubilant Mr Blair, "without our troops ever having to leave their bunkers, except of course in coffins.

"Make no mistake," concluded the Prime Minister, "this was the greatest victory for the British Army since Custer's Last Stand *(surely 'Dunkirk'? Ed)*.

GOLDSMITH 'CHANGED ADVICE' TO HIMSELF OVER 'ILLEGAL ENTRY' INTO BARRISTER

by Our Legal Staff **Joshua Rosenbeard**

THE Attorney-General, Lord Goldsmith, it was revealed last night, had "radically changed" advice given to himself on the proposed incursion into the bed of a fellow lawyer, Ms Dollis Hollis QC.

Initially, in a written opinion addressed to himself, Lord Goldsmith advised strongly against the proposed incursion of Ms Hollis's "private territory", on the grounds that it would be "wholly improper" and "entirely unjustified".

Goldsmith's opinion, marked "For My Eyes Only", went on, "Having considered the various options open to me with regard to the proposed course of action, I am strongly persuaded that it would be unethical, fraught with risk, and quite possibly might end in my wife finding out.

"For these reasons, *propter aliquod re legoverensis*, I am minded to advise my client, myself, to refrain from pursuing this affair any further."

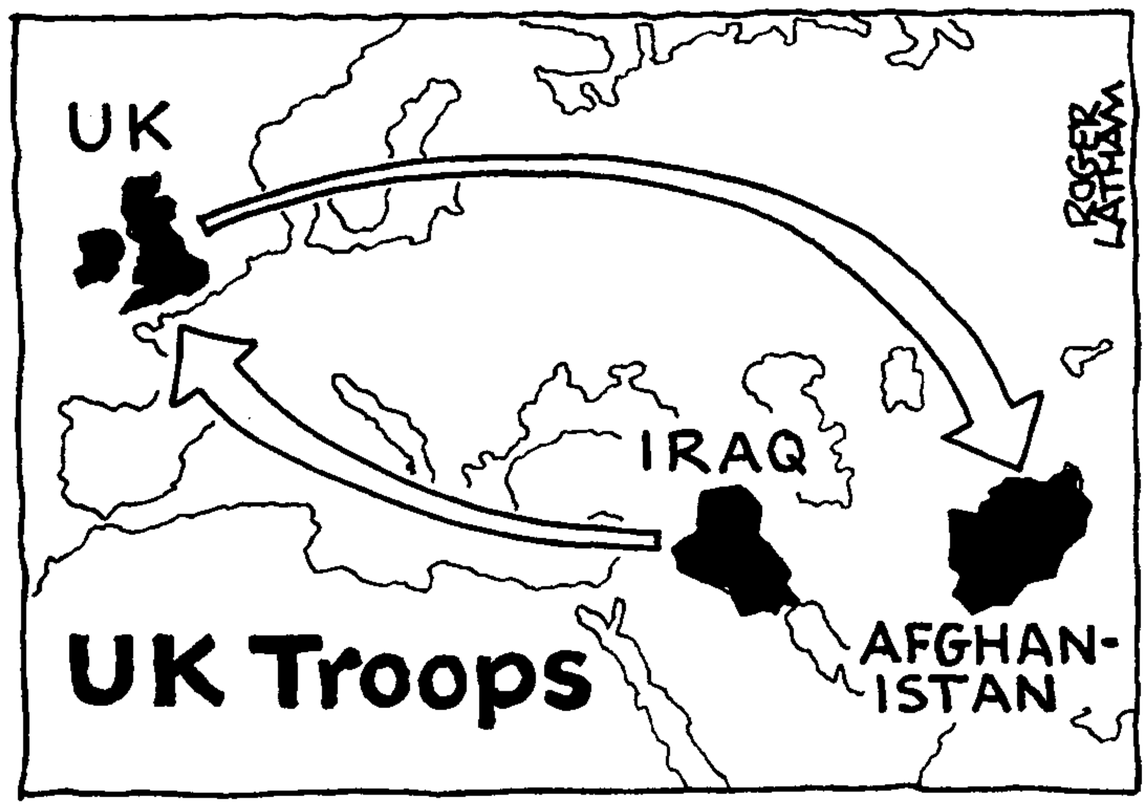
Weapon Of Self-Destruction

Only a few days later, however, according to documents which have come to light under the Freedom of Fornication act, the Attorney-General unaccountably reversed his earlier opinion.

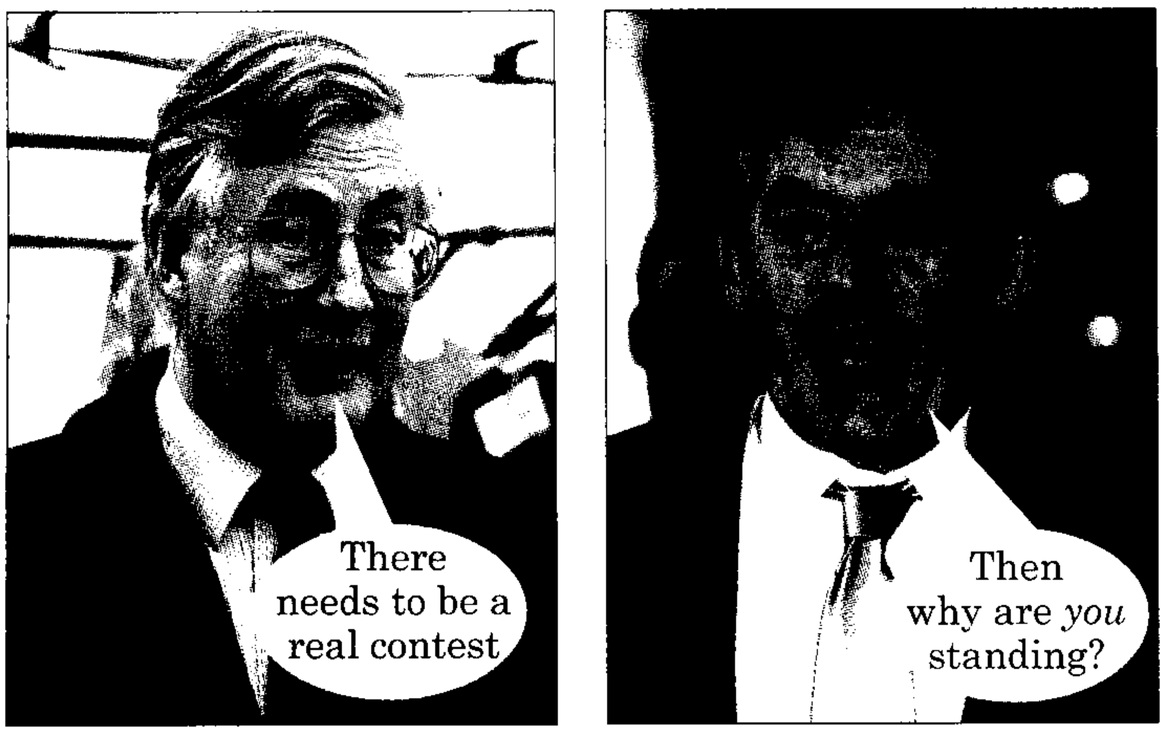
In an amended version, he wrote, "Why not? You only live once! Dollis is an absolute cracker, esepcially in that wig! Go for it, my son!"

The question remains – what was it that caused Britain's top legal officer to *(cont. p.94)*

SPRING MIGRATION ROUTES



MEACHER TO CHALLENGE BROWN



Nursery Times

Friday, March 2, 2007

JEMIMA AND GRUNT– IT'S ALL OVER

by **Beatrix Harry Potter**

YES, all the birds and the bees were a-sighing and a-sobbing when they heard the news that the farmyard's favourite couple have decided to go their separate ways.

Pig-about-town Hugh Grunt and the beautiful Jemima Puddleduck, daughter of the late Sir Jeremy Fishpaste, the marmite magnate and amateur angler, have finally split, after a stormy relationship that had long been the hottest gossip item in Nurseryland.

The Pig Issue

Friends of the couple assure me that no other farmyard animals are involved.

But, they tell me, "at the heart of it is Grunt's inability to commit and make an honest duck of Jemima".

However, Lady Annabel Puddleduck, Jemima's handsome mother and widow of Sir Jammy Dodger, the biscuits-to-jam king, told me last night "there are plenty more fish in the pond as my late husband used to say, before he was tragically swallowed by a gigantic trout".

Having a Quick Duck

Wasting no time, Grunt has hastily made it up with his ex-bunny girl, Miss Liz Flopsy, whose forthcoming wedding to the Indian elephant Mr Ali Barbar, is the talk of the jungle.

It seems that Grunt has agreed to be the Best Pig at the three-week long nuptials and to make a speech in which he has promised not to poke fun at Mr Barbar, or to make embarrassing jokes about he and Miss Flopsy being "at it like rabbits" during their many years together.

POLLY FILLER

On The Widening Disparity Of Income In Modern Britain

LET's face it, nowadays you are either one of the "Haves" or the "Have Lots"! Or the "Haves" and "Have Yachts"!! Or the "Haves" and "Have Noughts" after their City bonuses!!!

I'm not envious of the new super-rich with their plasma-screen helicopters and their ski chalets in Barbados, but I can't help thinking the wealth gap between decent hard-working, life-style columnists and disgusting, über-rich merchant bankers is getting out of hand!!

AS A working mum with a small toddler, I'm more of a "Have Snot" than a "Have Pots"!!! And since the Useless Simon thinks that the best way to earn a living is to slob about watching Pro-Celebrity Near Fatal Crashes with TV's Richard 'Hamster' Hammond on BBC2, there's no way *we'll* be flying off to the moon in a private jet!

Ok, I'd like hot-and-cold running staff, like some of our neighbours, rather than one useless girl from Poland who couldn't even plumb in a new boiler system! I'm not so much a "Have Got" as a "Have-Szlot" or whatever her stupid name is!!!

But don't get me wrong! I'm all for people being rewarded for their work – apart from Szlot, obviously, who is going straight back to Krakow, which will make me a Slav-not!!! But when the journalistic grafters of Britain can't afford the same sort of holidays as the ghastly vulgar people opposite us, something is rotten in the state of West London.

It's what I call the difference between the "Haves" and the "Have-Notting-Hills"!!!!

Polly Filler's best-selling new book "Punny Money", a hilarious sideways look at the British Economy, is published by Johnson & Johnson £17.99.

Advertisement

Mrs J

Frauds Reunited .co.uk

Mr M

DO you want to get together again with your husband who you left in order to save your job? Then **Frauds Reunited** can bring you together again and help you to forget all that embarrassing stuff about bribes and mortgages.

We will provide you with the current address of your former husband, so that you can invite him round for a night of unbridled ambition *(Surely "passion"? Ed.)*

Just send cash now in a brown paper marked "From Signor Berlusconi".

A Statement From Channel Four

IT HAS been brought to our attention that in the quiz show segment 'You Say, We Pay', *The Richard and Judy Show* has been cheating viewers by encouraging them to ring in long after the contest has closed.

In response to this, Channel 4 has set up a phone line in which any viewers affected by the rigged quiz can call in and win themselves £100 by answering the following simple question – Channel 4 is:

A. A squalid and grotesque self parody of the channel it was originally set up to be

B. A banana

C. Cheese

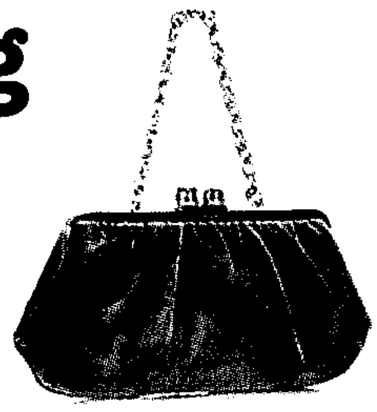
D. Milk

Calls charged at £7.50 a minute off peak, £39 a minute all other times.

Ring now – it's already too late to win!

Exclusive to the Daily Gnome

Coleen McLoughlin's Handbag Speaks Exclusively To Us!



On the eve of the publication of her autobiography, Coleen McLoughlin's handbag speaks to us.

It was the story everyone wanted and we've got it.

■ Read about how she was carried into shops by Coleen!!

■ Read how she was used for carrying money around!!

■ Read how she was cruelly chucked aside in favour of a newer bag!!

It's the autobiography of the year... and it's exclusively in The Daily Gnome

POETRY CORNER

In Memoriam Sheridan Morley, theatre critic

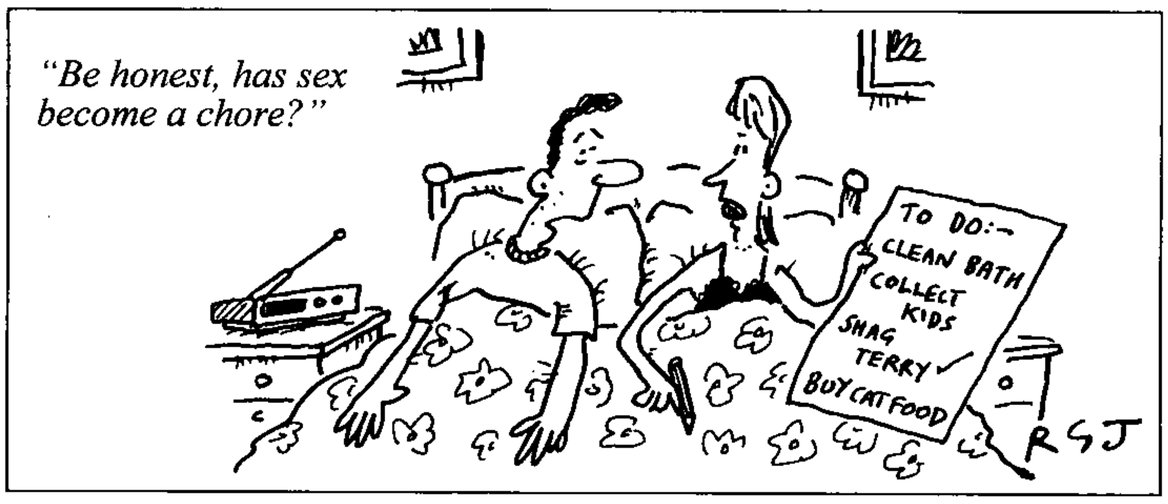
So. Farewell
Then Sheridan
Morley, celebrated
Theatre critic.

You were famous
For falling
Asleep
In the middle of
Plays you were
Reviewing.

Now you have
Fallen asleep
Forever.

E.J. Thribb(17½)

THATCHER STATUE



DIARY

EVE POLLARD ON JACKIE KENNEDY

I've always been totally captivated by the woman the world knew simply as "Jackie" but who is probably better known as Jackie Kennedy, wife of top former American Prime Minister John H. Kennedy.

They nicknamed her The First Lady. They knew she wasn't the kind of gal who would ever put up with being Second, Third, Fourth, or Fifth Lady.

I've now devoted many years of research getting right to the very heart of this tantalising, busty, fun-loving, former pole-dancing widow of brutally assassinated Prime Minister J. H. Kennedy, as blonde as she was beautiful – and with a chequebook to match!

My deeply compassionate and sexy novel about her – *Jack's Widow* – has already taken America by storm. The Washington Post praised it as "truly excruciating" and my publisher's catalogue raved about it as "a new 324-page novel by former British journalist Eve Pollard". And my old friend Sir David Frost went so far as to put in writing that "I look forward to reading it when I get a spare moment" – than which there can be no higher praise!

Everyone is just amazed how I've managed to get under the perfect, tear-sodden skin of Jackie. I guess that's because she was in many ways so like me – though sadly Jackie never achieved her ultimate ambition of editing top British newspaper *The Sunday Express* for nearly eighteen months in the mid-1990s. She couldn't – because by that time she was already dead!

My Booker-nominated blockbuster starts at the rain-soaked funeral of top American Prime Minister John H. Kennedy in 1968.

Everyone who is anyone in The Big Apple is present – The Fab Four, better known as top British pop group The Rolling Stones, leading bearded revolutionary Fido Castro of Jamaica, top office cleaner J. Edgar Hoover, glamorous Mayor of New York Hillary Clinton, tragically dead Hollywood screen idol Marilyn Monroe, and Kennedy's secret lover Britney Spears to name just a few.

On the first page, Jackie Kennedy stands by her dead husband's grave, turning over the previous day's events in her turmoiled mind:

"Bang!

"At first she had thought it was someone pulling a cracker at a child's birthday. Why, she had even turned round to look for a delicious cake with all its candles aglow.

"Bang! Bang!

"But it wasn't a cracker. And – hey! – there was no cake! It was a gun – and someone was firing it at Jack!

"Her first thought was that it must be their old enemy, Lee Oswald Mosley, from his position up there in the Chicago Book Depository. The bastard! She always knew Lee would come to no good!

"But then she thought she heard three guns firing at once.

"Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Could it be their deadly enemy Grassy Noel? Now she just didn't know. Oh well. Whatever! The main thing was that Jack's head had by now fallen clean off, and now she had to scramble out and fetch it before it rolled off the back of their exclusive highly-polished luxury chauffeur-driven limousine and into the street, where it could hurt someone!"

By this time, the reader is gripped. Still at the graveside, Jackie's thoughts turn to her dead husband, and the perfectly-formed tears start to drip down her cheeks. It is here that my lifelong research really comes into its own.

"Drip!

"Nothing would ever be the same again.

"Drip!

"With her husband dead, Jackie would be escorted from The White House – the great big six-bedroomed New York mansion popularly known as The White House because it was a house and it was painted white – where the Prime Minister of America traditionally lives.

"Drip!

"But who could the newly-widowed Jackie turn to now?

"With four children to care for, the only thing she could look forward to was a life begging in rags on the streets of Las Vegas, home to glitzy Hollywood, where all the top movies are made.

"Drip!

"Across the crowd of mourners, her tear-filled eyes fell on the unmistakable figure of supersexy womaniser firm but ruthless swarthy nutbrown multimillionaire Harry O'Nassis, formerly married to sultry Greek songbird Nana Mouskouri.

"Drip!

"'And may the Lord have Mercy on his Soul!' As the attendants lowered Jack H. Kennedy's corpse solemnly into its grave to the tune of *The Last Post*, Harry O'Nassis's eyes popped out of his head. Across the way, Kennedy's widow was busy winking and mouthing something to him through her red-hot lips. But what the hell was she saying?

"It was like a dream come true.

"'Marry me, big boy!'"

The very next day, as the sensuous Mediterranean sun shimmers tempestuously on their state-of-the-art luxury cruise liner, and their VIP guests feast on the finest hand-crafted Kebabs specially flown in from the legendary Isle of Shish, washed down with the rarest vintage Retsina, the former First Lady is formally declared Mrs Jackie O'Nassis by their close friends Pope Alfonso the Tenth and his wife Sue.

Paddling behind in her leaky dinghy, anguished former wife Nana Mouskouri surveys the scene through tear-strewn binoculars, mouths ancient Greek curses, slips into her flippers, reaches for her harpoon, and plots her dastardly revenge...

Friends ask me why, with all my detailed inside knowledge of Jackie, I have chosen to write this book as fiction. I tell them it's the only way I have found to convey the inner truth behind the enigma that was my good friend Jackie Kennedy, wife, lover, icon, spy. The book has already taken America by storm – they tell me a store in Williamsburg, Ohio is seriously considering placing an order for an extra copy – and it's now set to do the same in Britain.

I'm delighted not just on my own behalf, but on behalf of the entire Kennedy family, the world over. They have waited too long for a serious work commemorating Johnny and Jackie as they really were, and what they achieved, both in and out of bed.

As told to

CRAIG BROWN

I'M REALLY INTO THIS FORAGING THING, TROY. IT'S AMAZING THE WILD FOOD YOU CAN FIND...
BRILLIANT, DAD.
ON PREVIOUS FORAGES I'VE FOUND AND TRIED: WILD GARLIC, CHICKWEED AND DANDELION LEAVES...
AWESOME DAD.
NETTLES, WILD CHERVIL AND MUSHROOMS...
MAGIC, DAD.
UNFORTUNATELY NOT. JUST ORDINARY CHANTERELLE MUSHROOMS
OH

Literary Review

Scotland the rave

The Steep Approach to Garbadale

Iain Banks

(Little Brown £17.99)

THIS is Iain Banks's first "proper" novel (as opposed to the sci-fi stuff he turns out under the name of Iain M. Banks) for five years. The delay has been ascribed by the author, in one of those admiring *Independent on Sunday* profiles, to the break-up of his quarter-century marriage. Hitherto Mr B's novels have generally been rated by the critics as quite entertaining but full of undifferentiated dialogue and giving the impression that they were cobbled together in about three weeks. Regular patrons will be reassured to learn that the unprecedented half-decade incubation period has had no effect whatever on the Banks muse, and that *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* is quite entertaining, full of undifferentiated dialogue and giving the impression that it was cobbled together in about three...

As with most of Mr B's thrumming *oeuvre*, the new one is dense with symbolical import. It kicks off with sleek young company exec Fielding driving up to Scotland to try and prise his runaway cousin Alban from a Perthshire squat. This allows Banks a heaven-sent opportunity to indulge the Irvine Welsh side of his nature ("Al? Al? Al, ya dozy cunt, fucken wake up" etc etc), while striking one or two faintly suspect notes. "Mobile phone" in north of the border patois is "mobby", you fear, not "moby". The scent of a nice middle-class author gone slumming grows stronger when – lawks! - the Perthshire low-lifes start *explaining* their argot to the reader – "Meanwhile I'm helping with the table-clearing, getting a beamer (that means going red in the face, by the by, not anything else)."

Fielding and Alban, it turns out, are members of the Wopuld family, well-heeled descendants of a canny Victorian inventor who devised a Monopoly-style board game called *Empire*, now up-graded into an immensely lucrative computer bore-fest. Spraint Corp, the US combine that owns a quarter of the shares, is now bidding for complete control and an extraordinary general meeting of the board is poised to vote. Its figurative scenery hauled creakily into place – that's right, the board game is called *Empire*, the potential purchasers are *Americans* – the novel heads off into the personal past, Alban's underage fling with lickerish cousin Sophie (voyeuristic couplings in the rhododendrons), the mystery of his mother's suicide and his current walk-out with mathematical genius and tsunami survivor Verushka.

It's at this point that the novel's sub-text starts to take root: not US imperialism or oral sex, to both of which Mr B devotes many a fervent page, but, bless us all, *popular music*. Like his Scots contemporary Ian Rankin, Banksy can't resist turning nearly everything he writes into a check-list of the groovy material emanating from his MP3. As early as page 47 Alban can be found reminiscing about a '90s business trip to Singapore, whose soundtrack was provided by the Chemical Brothers' *Block Rockin' Beats*. Three pages later Fielding prods the new Coldplay CD into his car stereo. And yet Banks's spiritual home looks to be somewhere back in the 1980s. Come page 58 there's mention of Sophie's Frankie Goes To Hollywood tee shirt. By page 65 the young lovers are discussing Talking Heads, Prefab Sprout and U2. Verushka turns out be a Led Zeppelin fan (page 165) while in the course of a brief Reagan-era reunion in America the cousins shed elegiac tears over *This is the Sea* by The Waterboys.

And so it goes on, including an entirely gratuitous, paragraph-long survey of the contents of Verushka's iPod (Gwen Stefani, Primal Scream, The Beatles, in case you're interested). The rest of *The Steep Approach to Garbadale* is full of lectures. Alban uses the EGM as an excuse to harangue the Yanks about Iraq. There are other eye-catching disquisitions about climate change and the wickedness of organised religion.

The real core of the book, on the other hand, takes in the time Alban spends flat-sharing with some *Empire*-obsessives, a cue for lots of mock-philosophy about "There was the game, and then there was the meta-game. Even without a league lasting all year long, there was always the meta-game, the game beyond the game..." All this reinforces the impression of a motivating spirit that is faintly juvenile, something conceived beneath metaphorical bedclothes after lights out with the John Peel Show playing along in the background. If old Banksy here didn't write novels for a living, you just *know* he'd have ended up working in a Dungeons and Dragons store.

MORE ON THE MOORS...

WHAT is this monster rising from the grave? It's Myra Hindley, whose memory has been revived yet again by BBC producer Duncan Staff in a book serialised at epic length by the *Daily Mail* last week.

The only crumb of comfort is that on this occasion, thankfully, Staff's tabloid drivel is not being regurgitated in yet another television "documentary" on the subject. Perhaps even the dumbed-down BBC has finally been stung by the accusations that Staff's past efforts (an extraordinary three programmes) were tasteless, twisted or downright tedious.

More likely, it is because the Greater Manchester Police no longer feel compelled to co-operate with Staff in his endless efforts to exploit the Hindley-Brady saga. They went on record to say they were "extremely angry" at his last effort, claiming that Staff "deliberately misled" the public in both the TV programme and an accompanying feature in the *Mail on Sunday*..

In the first part of the new *Daily Mail* serialisation, Staff is clearly overwhelmed that Hindley deigned to telephone him after he wrote to her. (Did it ever occur to him that she was scraping the bottom of the barrel? Every other sensible hack she had attempted to coerce refused to respond to her entreaties.) In a moment of self-doubt, Staff asks an "expert" whether he was manipulated by Hindley and might have become her "stooge".

In fact Staff has proved every bit as manipulative as the woman with whom he enjoyed such a mutually beneficial relationship. His book is entitled *The Lost Boy* – a reference to 12-year-old Keith Bennett, the last of Hindley and Brady's victims, whose body has never been found.

Bennett was also the subject of Staff's 2001 film *Body Hunt*, which followed a search of Saddleworth Moor using three maps sent to him by Hindley that supposedly showed where the body had been buried. Nothing was found; all the programme achieved was to reduce Keith Bennett's brother to tears by raising his hopes and then dashing them.

Undaunted, Staff returned to the spot in 2004 for *The Moors Murder Code*, in which he claimed to have "new evidence" pinpointing Bennett's grave – a photo of Myra Hindley on Saddleworth Moor. Yet again the search produced nothing. "We have already been clear with Mr Staff that the work that has been done on the photograph has proved to be fruitless," the Manchester police pointed out. They accused him of raising expectations among Bennett's family "with absolutely no foundation for doing so".

And now comes *The Lost Boy* – billed by publishers Transworld as "an exhaustive, and sensitive, exploration into all aspects of these murders and their long-felt aftermath". Yeah, right.

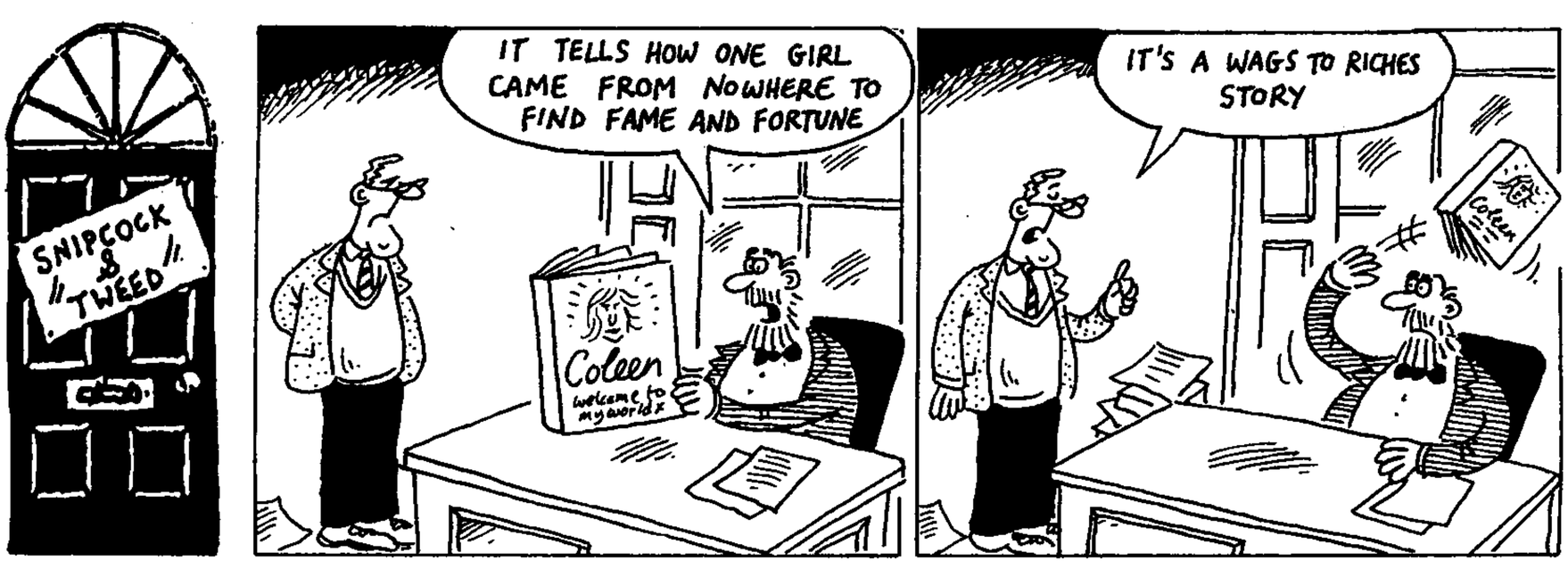
BOOKS & BOOKMEN

■ ONLY four months to go until readers desperate for yet more books about the People's Princess can buy *The Diana Chronicles* by Tina Brown, just in time for the tenth anniversary of the car crash.

For such a major undertaking Tina clearly needed a little helper – and found one in the form of sometime *Express* hackette and *Press Gazette* editor Philippa Kennedy. Although Kennedy has spent much of the last year researching and writing on Tina's behalf, it seems her fee is only a tiny fraction of the $2m advance which Brown collected from Random House.

Kennedy's previous attempt to break into the world of books was an unauthorised biography of Jodie Foster, published 12 years ago. She was promptly sued by the American paper *Entertainment Weekly*, from which she had lifted large chunks of the text without acknowledgement or permission. The hapless Kennedy had to pay damages and publish a grovelling apology.

We trust there will be no such embarrassments this time.


SNIPCOCK & TWEED
IT TELLS HOW ONE GIRL CAME FROM NOWHERE TO FIND FAME AND FORTUNE
Coleen
welcome to my world x
IT'S A WAGS TO RICHES STORY
Coleen

■ GREAT excitement in the world of gangster-fiction at our story in the last *Eye* about *Till Death Us Do Part*, the debut novel by one "Garry Jackson" – aka Garry Johnson, a veteran of the Oi! music scene and old mucker of Garry "Gal Gonad" Bushell. Johnson/Jackson himself helpfully emailed us the Amazon reviews of the book, all of them five-star raves.

"This book would make a great film – with Ray Winstone in the title role," writes Oliver John, a reader from Essex (where, by a remarkable coincidence, Johnson also lives). "I

loved it to bits and honestly think it would make a great movie," concurs Peter Tibbs, another Essex Man. "Ray Winstone was born to play East End tough guy Harry Harris and I hope he is offered the part."

Last year this same Peter Tibbs wrote an Amazon review of *Thugs, Mugs and Violence* by Jamie O'Keefe – who happens to be Johnson's publisher. "This book is hard-hitting and moving," he opined. "I can see it as a film starring TV tough guy Ray Winstone." Fancy!

But the most impressive verdict on Johnson's novel is still the quote from Garry Bushell that appears on the cover: "Bloody brilliant... If there's a better revenge novel around, I'd like to read it." Doubly impressive since Bushell hasn't actually read *Till Death Us Do Part*: Johnson made up the quote and stuck it on the cover without telling him.

■ BEN MACINTYRE's *Agent Zigzag*, the story of the Second World War double agent Eddie Chapman, was serialised on Radio 4 and received good reviews, including a rave from William Boyd. So what has he got to be grumpy about?

The existence of a cheaper, almost identically titled rival life of Chapman by Nicholas Booth, published a fortnight earlier. Fresh interest in the spy is due to MI5 releasing papers at Macintyre's instigation, but it seems that when he approached Chapman's widow, she wanted money. He refused, but his rival had no such scruples and so had exclusive access to her as well as being able to use the MI5 material. "I've been stitched up like a kipper!" moaned the *Times* hack.

■ THE practice of one agent overtly trying to woo an author away from another is frowned upon in the book world, hence the tut-tutting that surrounded the seduction techniques of Andrew "the Jackal" Wylie.

And hence Justin Cartwright's gentlemanly discretion when recalling in a recent interview that he was "shocked" when "a very famous literary agent came to me suggesting I write a thriller under a pseudonym so as to make a heap of money". Who could this be? The prime suspect is Ed Victor, who both fits the "very famous" bill and has just overseen the unlikely transformation of Booker winner John Banville into a pseudonymous author of crime fiction. He can no doubt expect to receive an equally shocking – but briefer suggestion from Cartwright's real agent at PFD.

■ DAVID ROCHE, the CEO of Borders, managed to offend much of his audience when addressing the Irish BA Dinner Dance recently with an anecdote regarding erectile dysfunction (not his own). Acquaintances of Roche are very familiar with the story, one of many slightly off-colour remarks he is prone to relate at public functions. He often tells the story himself of when, back in his HMV days, he was presenting an award to Kylie Minogue at an industry dinner and announced to a stunned audience that he had worked out that her name was an anagram of "You Like Minge". On accepting the prize, the diminutive Aussie songstress congratulated him on his spelling skills.

■ WATERSTONE'S has just launched its new rate card - the price list which dictates how much publishers have to pay the company to have their books displayed in its shops. So Offer Of The Week will require a substantial discount plus a payment of £10,000 for seven days. If you are lucky enough to be "selected" for the Bookseller's Choice promotion then you have to pay £1,000, otherwise the booksellers presumably change their minds. Most controversial of all, however, is Waterstone's Children's Book Prize, where the company will charge £1,000 if you reach the shortlist. This is one award that some publishers will be hoping they don't get selected for.

FIRST DRAFTS
Here comes the night train crossing the border bringing the cheque and the postal order which both end up in the pockets of porters
Pearsall
W.H. Auden

TON UP FOR WYSTAN!

(Lines in celebration of the centenary of the birth of W.H. Auden)

He buggered off in the dead of winter
The Nazis were in Poland, the Czechs had been smothered
Not quite the time for a poetic gesture
The country was at war; no one much bothered
Even the most fervent well-wisher would
Wonder why he'd flown the coop with Isherwood

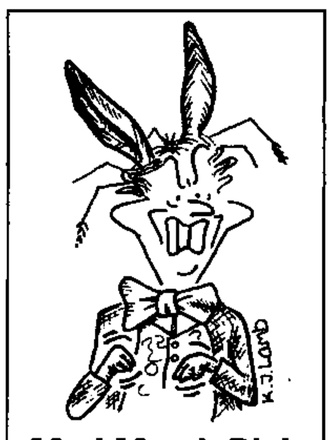
Far from his agreeable boat-trip
The armies ran over the Maginot Line
The smoke rose, and the burned bodies were raked into particles
But his sojourn in the Big Apple was marked
By a number of magazine articles

Now he's in every broadsheet in the country
And all that equivocal stuff about Spain is "the conscience of a nation" –
Rather than the usual cry of self-preservation
The thoughts of a dead man, turned all transcendent
Make a nice 1500 words in the *Independent*
'We must love one another and die.'
Sounds good, Uncle Wiz. Let's give it a try.

Guild of poets, stifle sniggers
Wystan Auden's reached three figures
Let the English vessel lie
Safe beneath Manhattan sky

On the far side of the Atlantic
Let the poet's muse stay antic
Never mind absconding sods
Keep the free man from false Gods...

(That's enough Auden, Ed.)


Mad March Blair

Pseuds Corner

Coates, 38, is getting something of a reputation as a one-off. His work has been described as quintessentially British, focused on the boundary between the human and the animal. For his best-known piece, Journey to the Lower World (2005), he dressed as a stag and performed a shamanic ritual for the residents of a condemned tower block in Liverpool. Next month he will dress as a badger for a similar ritual at the Hayward Gallery in London. His 40 minute film A Guide to the British Non-Passerines (2001) has him mimicking 97 bird species, and for a photographic project, Goshawk, he strapped himself 20ft up a tree in an attempt to become a rare bird of prey.

Guardian

Although I argue vehemently against modern pop music, on grounds of its musical incompetence, verbal impoverishment and general morbidity, narcissism and salaciousness, although I fiercely object to disco dancing as a sacrilege against the human form and a collective rejection of civilised courtship; although I defend reels, minuets, galliards, sarabands and (as limiting cases) waltzes and polkas as the only ways in which ordinary humanity should dare to put its sexual nature on festive display, and although I regard the 12-bar blues and the flattened subdominant seventh as the lowest forms of vulgarity in music, I find rock 'n' roll in general, and Elvis in particular, irresistible, and would happily dance the night away to it. I cannot explain the thrill of delight with which I hear the first bars of Jailhouse Rock or the eagerness with which I at once search the vicinity for a partner: but there it is, appalling proof that, despite all my efforts, I am human.

Philosopher ROGER SCRUTON, 'Intellectuals discuss their guilty pleasures', *Guardian*

Evening Two: *Ophidicism – Eve and the Serpent*
This paper constitutes an attempt to radically re-examine the story of Eve's biblical encounter with the serpent. It will be argued that reconciliation between the two is crucial if we are to ever move into a post-moral and transhuman future. Whether this requires neo-pagan veneration or even sexual congress with snakes is one of the points to be discussed.

From a series of lectures on 'Zoophilia' by Dr Stephen Alexander, Treadwell Meeting Rooms

It always amazes me when I or any of my family are called "posh". It makes my husband, who is descended from a long line of Scottish earls on his mother's side and whose paternal forbears came over with William the Conqueror, honk with laughter.

RACHEL JOHNSON, *Evening Standard*

Hussein Chalayan is proposing to conflate past and present through historical migratory routes which have composed his homeland Cyprus, using genetic anthropology as a key in determining these ethnic trajectories.

This garment can be viewed as an architectural talisman, which morphs slivers of past and present, ultimately and perhaps paradoxically becoming a fragment of its own archaeological quest.

Label on white long-sleeved T shirt

CONTRIBUTORS: Paul Stevens, Laurie Stras (and many others), Patrick Neylan, J. James, Peter Stevens,.

£10 paid for all entries

IN THE BACK

CONGO

Asylum lunacy

THE government's current "country guidance" claiming it is safe to deport people to the Democratic Republic of Congo will be challenged at an Immigration Appeal Tribunal on 7 March.

The Tribunal has already accepted in a previous case that asylum seekers with a "political or military profile" are at risk of persecution if sent back, but a claim to have such a profile is often disbelieved. However, campaigners with experience of the DRC say that simply claiming asylum in Europe is enough for the authorities to label someone a dissident.

Eye 1103 revealed in 2004 that many returnees monitored by UK-based charities were being delivered directly into the hands of torturers. There is little chance of returnees going to a normal life as, on arrival at Kinshasa airport, UK officials hand them over to the authorities. Airport-based officials may then try to extort a "fine" of up to $1,000, and those who cannot pay are often sent to the DRC's grim prisons. The UK immigration service even allowed representatives of the DRC Interior Ministry to visit and interview Congolese detainees in the UK, despite the country's horrific human rights record.

The Home Office's current guidance states that "apart from encountering questioning and possibly temporary detention, there is no evidence to suggest that returning Congolese nationals face systematic mistreatment".

But it may be more nervous about the March appeal case than it is letting on. During February a number of Congolese individuals and families in the UK were rounded up and taken into detention. These included Aseng Nzoabar and her children, the youngest of whom is just three, who were grabbed in a dawn raid in Leeds. Aseng has been in the UK four years and says she was detained, raped and abused because of her ethnicity when she lived in the troubled Ituri Province of DRC. All were given removal directions stating that they were to be removed on a flight "at 21.00 hrs on 26 February 2007". Coincidence?

GREEN SPACES

Park keeping?

WHEN the railway came to Sudbury in the 1840s, part of its common lands were lost so a field in the Suffolk town was bought for winter grazing. It became known as Sudbury People's Park – but how much longer will the people enjoy it?

West Suffolk Hospital Trust has owned the land since 1987 – it was sold reluctantly to the NHS by the Sudbury Freemen's Association under threat of compulsory purchase. But cash for a planned community hospital never arrived and a smaller health development is to be built elsewhere. Part of the land was already used for housing, the rest remained open space.

Now the Trust is £9.5m in debt and wants to sell the park for 120 new houses. While locals might just swallow the loss of green space in return for a better hospital, losing it for housing is another matter.

A campaign by residents to get the land registered as a town green lost at the Court of Appeal in the 1990s. However, following the arrival of new laws, including the Commons Act 2006, and judgements in similar cases, Sudbury councillor Albert Pearce restarted the process with an application to Suffolk County Council last year. Lawyers for the hospital have now written to him threatening a fight all the way to the High Court – and saying he will face £20,000 in legal costs if he loses. Nice.

MOD

Dazzling Debut

THE Army's married quarters still look grim after a decade of "reform", but accommodation for single soldiers has had even less attention – till now.

The government has committed to replacing grim shared barracks with individual rooms with their own ablutions – a project known as Single Living Accommodation Modernisation, or SLAM. Giving squaddies their own en suite rooms by 2013 (though new recruits will share for "team building" purposes) is welcomed all round, but has the MoD found the right people for the job?

Tony Blair was apparently "delighted" to announce that Debut Services, a consortium led by Babcock, was taking on the latest £20m slice of SLAM. Nervous soldiers, however, may wonder whether the firm's bosses really are all that delightful. Babcock chairman Gordon Campbell is also chairman of British Nuclear Fuels: he was hired by the troubled firm to turn it round after a scandal over forged safety data. Under his leadership, BNFL has continued to experience fuel leaks and has failed to thrive. Another Babcock director, Dipesh Shah, brings more nuclear flavour on board. Until last June he was chief executive of the UK Atomic Energy Authority – a fact excluded from his biography on the Babcock website. Shah resigned after the Health and Safety Executive described his behaviour as "clearly unacceptable" (*Eye* 1163) – he had attempted to poach key safety staff to run the notorious Dounreay nuclear site in Scotland without consulting the regulator.

Babcock chases military contracts, so it also needs some top brass to decorate the board – such as Sir Nigel Essenhigh, the former First Sea Lord. Sir Nigel was in charge when the Navy signed contracts with Babcock for running port services, but retired early in 2002 after reportedly complaining about Naval cuts but being unable to stop them. The MoD's announcement at the time said Sir Nigel was leaving "to manage his smallholding in Devon" – a smallholding which seems to have morphed into a multinational military firm.

Babcock's accommodation company, Debut Services, is led by Major General John Stokoe. He left the Army to lead the defence wing of privatisation firm Amey. During his time there it won the massively expensive PFI refurbishment of the MoD's Whitehall headquarters. It's unlikely that privates in SLAM housing will have anything so luxurious as the £1,000 office chairs in use at the MoD's new pad.

DFID

Damp squibs

MORE detail has emerged on DfID's brilliant plan to bring the benefits of British water privatisation to Guyana at a cost of just over £2m (see last *Eye*).

First, in 1999, it gave accountancy firm KPMG around a third of the cash to draw up a report recommending water privatisation. This privatisation then became a condition of loans from the World Bank, so DfID spent £1,850,000 on a contract with Severn Trent. Never mind that Severn Trent had been sent packing in 1999 on a similar deal with the government in Trinidad, which terminated its contract early.

Alas, Severn Trent missed five out of seven of its performance targets in Guyana. Contracted to get potable water to 80 percent of the indigenous Indian settlements in Guyana, it managed to reach only 4.6 percent. After more failures and intense discussions, the firm agreed to an "amicable" early departure in February. Asked about the failure, DfID told *Private Eye* that it "does not push privatisation on to developing countries".

Certainly not. Incidentally, "Guyana" is an Amerindian word meaning "land of many waters"…

TRANSPORT POLICY

Road rage

NATIONAL road pricing could work well in a country with a transport policy – so not Britain then.

Tony Blair told e-petitioners opposing such a scheme that "road pricing is about tackling congestion" and "tackling congestion is a key priority for any government". But rail schemes are very hard to justify in England because cutting car journeys is officially a disbenefit. The potential lost income from fuel duty and VAT is stacked against any proposal for a new station or service. So the more a rail scheme would cut road congestion – i.e. the more it's needed – the worse the figures look and the less likely it is to win government approval. The same goes for bus and cycling facilities, and even "green wave" schemes to cut vehicle queues by synchronising successive traffic lights.

That's the real attitude to road congestion in Blair's government. A Treasury so jealous of its road revenues won't allow their progressive reduction by a system that (a) deters car use, (b) reduces the charge per mile as congestion falls, and (c) increases the public funding required to ensure the alternatives are sufficiently comprehensive and attractive.

How would road pricing work in a country with a transport policy? Many people would find it easy and safe to walk or cycle instead of using the car. Public transport would be cheaper than the car and have plenty of seats to take people into urban centres, where connecting trams or buses would distribute people to shops, offices and facilities. Trains would have space for bicycles, even in rush hour. People who still needed or wanted to use cars or trucks would be happy with "pay as you drive" because they'd get hassle-free travel in return.

But a country which genuinely encouraged people to switch from cars to other transport probably wouldn't need national road pricing in the first place. The reason "congestion is a major problem to which there is no easy answer", as Blair put it, is that Britain has been reshaped around the desires of the oil, motor and other big businesses.

The Beeching review was ostensibly to cut the public cost of railways but was ordered by a road-construction baron turned Tory transport minister; many of Beeching's cuts had, at best, a neutral effect on rail costs but delivered millions more journeys to the ever-expanding road network.

Planners fell into line. Housing, shopping centres and business parks were located for car access, with no requirements for developers or occupiers to fund new rail stations or bus routes. Hospitals and other essential facilities were centralised, creating more car traffic. Blair's crusade for choice in healthcare and education is premised on car ownership and use.

Cycling on roads has been officially discouraged, ostensibly for safety reasons but really because cyclists don't pay fuel duty. Journeys on foot have become slower and more unpleasant; walkers are forced through dingy underpasses or over footbridges and given brief traffic-light phases, often with multiple uncoordinated sections between traffic islands, to cross one road. Pedestrians don't pay fuel duty either.

Having spent half a century cajoling and forcing us into cars – making Britain the most car-dependent nation in Europe – does government really now want to get us out of them? No. There's no sign of change in official attitudes. Trains are still provided by companies whose duty is to maximise profits not passengers; their response to road pricing will be to raise fares instead of providing extra capacity. Buses outside London are under review but will continue to be regarded as an opportunity for private companies to make money. "New" Labour permits no new tram systems in England, not because they're unnecessary but because they're a threat to greedy bus firms like FirstGroup and don't guarantee fat profits for PFI consortia.

Congestion is therefore likely to remain a fact of life with or without road pricing.

BOARD GAMES

Jobs for the girls

IN A SPEECH to the World Congress of Accountants last November, Barbara Thomas Judge said it was "imperative" to have at least one professionally trained accountant on any board of directors. Judge, an American lawyer who is now chairman of the UK Atomic Energy Authority, forgot to mention another golden rule of modern business and government: it is imperative to have Barbara Thomas Judge on any board of directors.

Three weeks ago she was appointed chairman of Life Ltd, a renewable energy company. By the *Eye*'s calculation, busy Barbara now has no fewer than 29 jobs – all at the same time!

Apparently there is no conflict of interest between running an energy firm and chairing the UK Atomic Energy Authority. But observers of the atomic kitten's amazing career wonder how she'll find the time for this latest venture. Lady Judge (whose husband, Sir Paul Judge, is a former director-general of the Conservative Party) is also deputy chairman of Friends' Provident plc and a director of Portmeirion Group plc, Private Equity Investor plc, Hardy Underwriting plc, Victory Corporation plc (Beardie Branson's holding company for his Virgin clothing and cosmetics) and Quintain Estates and Development plc, owner of the Dome and Wembley. And that's just the plcs: she also graces the board of PA Consulting and venture-capital outfit Dynamic Solutions.

Three of the four new jobs Judge acquired in the past year are outside the UK and involve extensive travel. She has become a senior adviser to Hill & Associates, a private security business based in Hong Kong. She chairs the board of LoSoNoCo, another renewable energy business, based in America. She joined the board of Planet Group Inc, a credit-card processing company based in Long Island, NY.

Barbara is also an adviser to Cross Border Enterprises, a New York investment bank, and Millennium Associates, a mergers-and-acquisitions specialist, based in Switzerland. She clocks up further air miles as an international board member of Wharton Business School in Pennsylvania and Sabanci University in Istanbul. Oh, and last year she agreed to become chairman of the School of African and Oriental Studies in London.

Lady Judge is as well-connected in Whitehall as in the City – as she proved during her *annus mirabilis* of 2004. In January that year the then DTI secretary Patricia Hewitt made her deputy chairman of the Financial Reporting Council, responsible for promoting "high standards of corporate governance" in British companies. (Never mind that most corporate-governance wallahs these days believe no one should take on more than five non-executive directorships at once.) In March, Lord "Fatty" Falconer recruited her for the "corporate board" of his department of constitutional affairs. And four months later Patricia Hewitt put her in charge of the atomic energy authority.

Since then Judge has also joined the DTI's performance monitoring committee. Alas, the committee hasn't yet seen fit to investigate the "performance" which culminated in her own appointment at the UKAEA. It was a delicious three-act farce which deserves a wider audience.

In December 2003, as a board member of Quintain Estates, Barbara secured a non-executive directorship for her chum Joan MacNaughton, head of the DTI's energy division. (Under "new" Labour, mandarins are encouraged to become more business-minded by moonlighting in the private sector.) The following spring, by happy coincidence, MacNaughton chaired the selection panel to choose a new chairman for UKAEA – and by even happier coincidence recommended that Barbara should get the job. The DTI duly announced Judge's appointment on 30 July 2004, just as MacNaughton was packing her bags for a well-earned holiday at the luxury French villa of … Barbara Thomas Judge.

And what of Judge's performance since? Only last week Barbara's UKAEA was fined £140,000 for releasing radioactive particles into the sea and illegally dumping nuclear waste at Dounreay, for which it is responsible. Hours after the verdict, a radiation sweep of a public beach near the nuclear power plant found yet another radioactive particle – the most active "hot spot" yet discovered there, with a reading of 500,000 Bequerels.

Meanwhile the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate has served improvement notices on UKAEA ordering it to store radioactive waste more safely, after an incident in which a worker was contaminated with plutonium. It has until April to comply. Oh, and the latest report from the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) revealed that it fined UKAEA £2m last year for letting 58.5 gallons of hazardous, dissolved spent fuel spill on to a laboratory floor at the Dounreay cementation plant.

Bravo, Barbara! What on earth will she do for an encore?

HSBC

Capital values!

AT A TIME when every big company wants to be seen saving the planet, HSBC is greener than thou.

To much fanfare, it announced last year that it had become the world's first major bank to go "carbon neutral", "offsetting" all the carbon dioxide emissions from its operations by investing in worthy projects such as a wind farm in New Zealand and a venture that captures the methane from cow and pig manure in Germany.

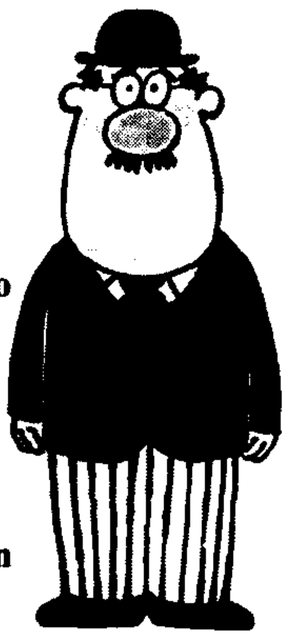
The Samling Group, a Malaysian logging giant, on the other hand, would be few people's idea of an environmentally friendly corporation. Last May, the *Times* reported how the survival of Asia's last nomadic people, the Penan – "the human equivalent of an endangered species", who inhabit the tropical rainforest in the state of Sarawak in Borneo – were being threatened by Samling, which the tribe accused of stealing their land and destroying the forest. In the past 45 years more than 90 per cent of Sarawak's rainforest – a world centre of biological diversity which has stood for 10 million years – has been logged. And according to a local NGO, on 7 February Malaysian police removed a blockade the Penan had set up, paving the way for Samling's tractors and bulldozers to move in and start chopping down the state's last area of primary rainforest.

Samling's activities have also attracted opprobrium in Guyana, where its subsidiary, Barama Company Ltd, had its official certificate for forest management suspended in January after independent auditors found "systematic major nonconformities" in its operations, including in its dealings with locals and its environmental performance.

So when representatives from the Samling Group announced the company's imminent listing on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange and the sale of its shares last week, the British bank enlisted to help arrange the sales was none other than that environmental paragon, HSBC. On its website HSBC makes a bold commitment not to provide "facilities and other forms of financial assistance, including any involvement in debt and equity capital markets activities and advisory roles, in respect of commercial logging operations in primary tropical moist forest and high conservation value forest". Perhaps the "listening bank" just hasn't heard about Samling's destructive practices?

VAT

Strange Customs



A VAT tribunal decision, so far unreported, shows that when the government appointed captain of industry David Varney as HM Revenue and Customs chairman in 2004 – the Chancellor declaring him "an outstanding business leader" – it did so knowing that he had not long before signed off a multi-million pound tax avoidance scam.

Before becoming the country's top taxman, Varney was, from 2001, the £500,000-a-year executive chairman of mobile phone company O_2. In 2002 the firm set up a subsidiary in Ireland called O_2 Communications, which redeemed vouchers and e-top-ups from British customers. The business had no reason to be in Ireland other than to exploit a loophole that meant the service would be VAT-free.

According to the Irish company's accounts, the total VAT dodged before the government clamped down on it would have been around £25m. HMRC continues to challenge the arrangement as an "abuse" of VAT rules and at a tribunal in March last year won the right to see the company's advice on the scheme. In the process the scam was exposed – just weeks before Varney (by now Sir David) resigned as HMRC chairman.

The ploy has loud echoes of a scheme used by a few high street retailers in recent years to route credit card transactions through offshore companies charging VAT-free "card handling" fees. That ruse so outraged HMRC that director-general Dave Hartnett described it as "playing with fire".

HMRC confirmed that Varney had declared "his involvement in the transaction covered by the VAT Tribunal decision" before becoming its chairman. On the selection panel he owned up to were Baroness Prashar, head of the Civil Service Commission, the then Cabinet secretary Sir Andrew Turnbull and the top Treasury mandarin at the time, now Sir Andrew's successor, Gus O'Donnell. Of all people, O'Donnell would have understood the seriousness of the scam. Shortly before he had told Parliament that every year VAT-dodging costs Britain "twelve billion. Big numbers." Even though the rules allowed him to, O'Donnell didn't tell his boss Gordon Brown, and no minister, HMRC insists, knew anything of Varney's scheme.

Once installed as Dracula in charge of the blood bank, Varney looked kindly on tax-dodging multinationals. Last year he produced the "Varney Review" of large company taxation for the Chancellor. Its recommendations, all enthusiastically adopted by Gordon, include fewer and quicker tax enquiries for big business and extra-statutory rights of appeal to HMRC's top brass should tax inspectors prove awkward (not an option afforded to the little guy). The plans were criticised at a recent parliamentary hearing for paying no regard to the possible costs of going soft on multinationals.

HMRC insists Sir David's departure was unrelated to the VAT scheme's exposure. Oddly, however, the *Eye*'s Freedom of Information requests both to HMRC and the Treasury for papers related to his resignation have yielded just official announcements and anodyne press briefings. Both departments insist that, despite the significance of the move, not a single email, memo, minuted meeting, or anything else even mentioning the departure of the HMRC chairman, or the advisory position he was then given with the Chancellor, exists. If true, Blair's unaccountable "sofa" government looks decidedly punctilious next to the chaise-longue affair evidently operating on Brown's patch.

In the City

NEWS that the Serious Farce Office intends to spend up to £22m investigating bribes to Saddam Hussein's regime as part of the corrupted UN oil-for-food programme is a convenient sop to those – such as the attorney-general Lord Goldsmith – who maintain, despite the BAE Systems Saudi surrender, that Britain is not soft on overseas corruption. Perish the thought – even though not a single foreign corruption case has been brought since the banning of overseas bribes in 2001.

The SFO has been mulling the Iraq case since a report by former US Federal Reserve Bank chairman Paul Volcker in October 2005 identified 2,400 companies around the world who had paid more than £1bn in kickbacks to get business from Saddam. Volcker identified 11 British companies that had made improper payments.

It is understood that Volcker has been expressing his frustration at the failure of the British authorities to take any action after well over a year of studying his report. The Americans have also criticised the BAE climbdown.

So the fact that the SFO made its decision to go ahead with the probe of British companies just weeks after dropping the BAE case is no doubt coincidental, but nevertheless helps the much-criticised Goldsmith.

One big reason for the delay has been cost. The SFO wanted assurance that the huge bill for such an inquiry – involving major multinationals such as GlaxoSmithKline and AstraZeneca as well as smaller British companies – would get dedicated funding. After the furore that greeted his intervention in the BAE case, Goldsmith was no doubt only too glad to press that case with the Treasury.

As is usual now in such big investigations, the bulk of it will be outsourced to one or more firms of accountants, who will receive a multi-million-pound fee for their efforts.

Those who did business with Iraq either for oil or humanitarian aid were required to make secret kickbacks if they wanted the business. This was usually done by inflating the prices paid – the very tactic beloved of the Saudis. Saddam and his cronies used this money to fund the regime as well as the Hussein family's lifestyle.

GSK was accused by Volcker of paying at least $1m in kickbacks. Much smaller payments were said to have been paid by AstraZeneca ($162,000) and Eli Lilly ($343,000). Scottish engineers Weir were said to have paid $4.5m.

The delay while funding was agreed has once again left Britain in the starting blocks while other runners long ago set off in search of Saddam's funders and UN sanctions busters.

The US has already launched prosecutions and earlier this month negotiated its first corporate plea bargain – with the El Paso natural gas group, which agreed to pay $7.7m regarding payments made to Iraqi government officials between 2001 and 2002. Its Coastal Corporation subsidiary paid nearly $5.5m in kickbacks on Iraqi oil purchases. Most of the money will be handed over to the Iraqi government – hopefully to fund development. El Paso also paid a $2.2m fine to the Securities & Exchange Commission.

Two other countries have also acted far more promptly over Volcker's findings. In France, the chief executive of the Total oil group has been charged along with several other officials and businessmen. In Australia, a royal commission investigated the companies that did business with Iraq. Eleven former executives of the Australian Wheat Board are expected to be charged after the commission reported last November.

Meanwhile in Britain it was business as usual where overseas bribery is concerned. Despite the Volcker evidence, compiled over 18 months, the SFO's Iraq probe is set to last some three years, by which time the offences will be rather dated – the oil-for-food programme ran from 1996 until Saddam was ousted by Dubya and the Dear Leader in 2003.

But the passage of time may not be the only problem prosecutions face.

Any corruption offences will have to have taken place after Britain adopted the international anti-corruption convention in 2001. This was one of the excuses given by Goldsmith for halting the BAE Saudi inquiry. It has to be assumed that the lengthy SFO "vetting" process has ensured that it will not trip up on the same point.

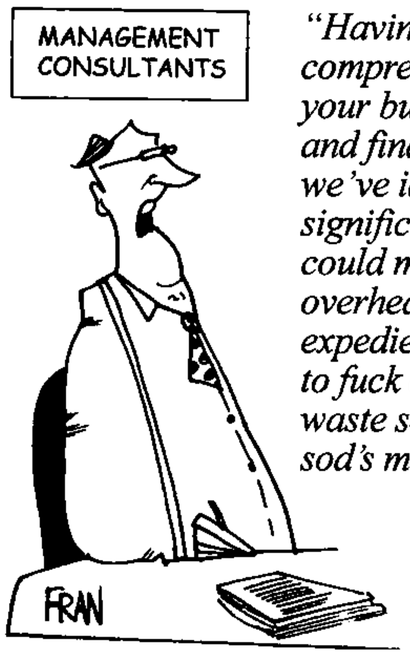
More significant, however, could be another argument run by Goldsmith as to why the Saudi case was certain to fail (a view not shared by SFO director Robert Wardle). Goldsmith argued that as any kickbacks or favours to corrupt Saudi princes or their relatives would be said to have been authorised by the Saudi regime, it would be difficult if not impossible to proceed.

This was because, as Wardle admitted in the *Financial Times* on 26 February, it was necessary to show that the Saudi officials or agents acted without the consent of the king. The outdated British corruption law – which last year celebrated its centenary – requires that the defendant acted against the interests of his "principal", in this case the Saudi monarch. As the corrupt Saudi royals are all in favour of fleecing their citizens, it is most unlikely that the current King Abdullah would have agreed to a prosecution of any of his brothers or their relatives whose fingers were in the al-Yamamah pie.

Now how different, it might be asked, will the situation be over Iraq? Saddam is dead and so cannot be questioned never mind prosecuted. But if the payments were clearly authorised from the top, how can those involved be said to have acted against the interests of the Iraqi principals?

The British companies will no doubt plead a similar excuse or some form of duress, or say that they were misled by local agents. The three drug companies involved may argue that the medicines they were supplying were approved by the UK authorities.

Like BAE, all the companies deny paying any bribes or sanctions busting. But then they would, wouldn't they. And if any charges do emerge from this belated and expensive Iraq investigation, what odds on an agreed deal whereby fines are paid, guilty pleas taken and the companies say they had to do it but it was all a long time ago and all those involved, like Saddam, are no longer with us?



"Having conducted a comprehensive review of your business strategy and financial forecasts we've identified significant savings you could make in your overheads by the simple expedient of telling me to fuck off and go and waste some other poor sod's money"

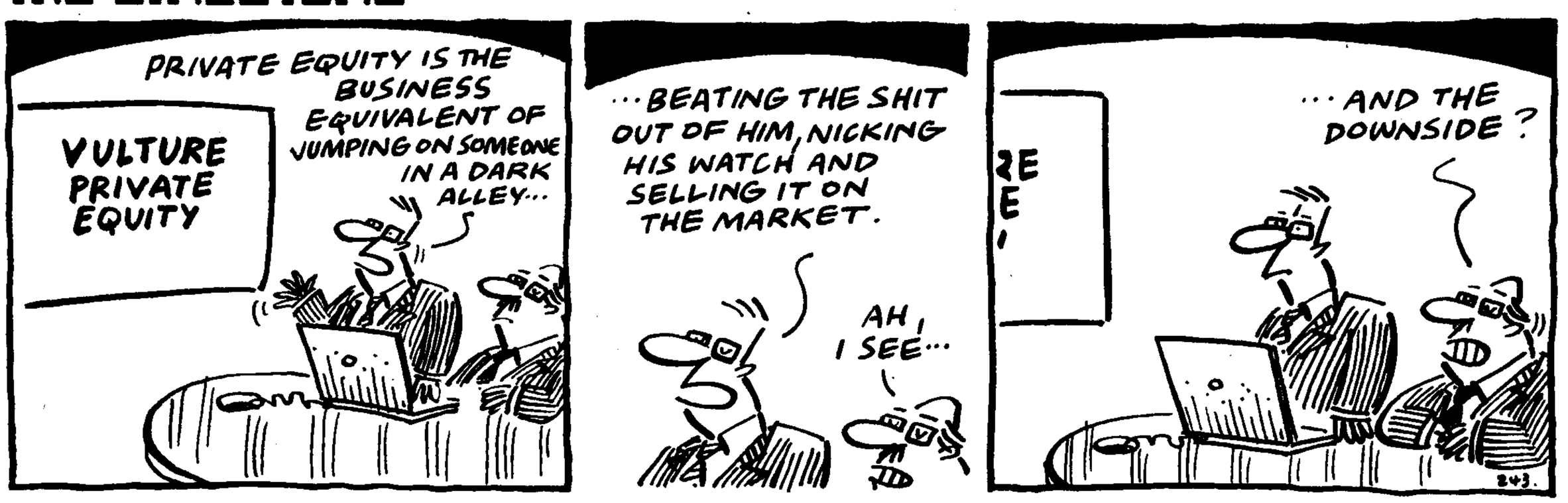
IN THE last *Eye* we reported that Goldsmith, in his "thorough external review" of the investigation and prosecution of fraud cases, was leaving his options open. This "leaves the thought that maybe Goldsmith wants to roll the SFO in part into that still unproven Blairite creation, the Serious Organised Crime Agency, or create a new fraud agency based around the beefed-up DTI fraud prosecution unit. The SFO as such could then disappear."

Over a week later, on February 23, the *Guardian* plastered across its front page the "revelation" that "according to well-placed sources, one of the proposals favoured by the attorney-general is partially merging the SFO within the much larger Serious Organized Crime Agency…. The remaining SFO lawyers would join the Crown Prosecution Service."

Goldsmith reportedly rushed round to the SFO that day to deny his intended review would have any such result. We (and the *Guardian*) will have to wait and see.

ON THE domestic corruption front, the honours inquiry appears to be heading towards a conclusion – in terms of police reports to the Crown Prosecution Service – by April or possibly May. Just in time for the local elections.

Those in the frame remain Lord Levy and Sir Chris Evans plus the three Downing Street insiders – Jonathan Powell, Ruth Turner and John McTernan. Of the Downing Street trio only Turner, the Dear Leader's political liaison officer, has so far been arrested and bailed (until next month after a further interview last week). A key development will be whether Powell, the Prime Minister's chief of staff, is arrested when he attends an expected second interview. Levy and Evans are already on


THE DIRECTORS
DREDGE & RIGG
PRIVATE EQUITY IS THE BUSINESS EQUIVALENT OF JUMPING ON SOMEONE IN A DARK ALLEY...
VULTURE PRIVATE EQUITY
...BEATING THE SHIT OUT OF HIM, NICKING HIS WATCH AND SELLING IT ON THE MARKET.
AH, I SEE...
...AND THE DOWNSIDE?
2+3.

JOINED-UP GOVERNMENT

January 2007: Ministers consider splitting Home Office into smaller organisations in order to better "protect security and administer justice".

February 2007: Ministers consider merging Serious Fraud Office into Serious Organised Crime Agency along with previously autonomous National Criminal Intelligence Service, National Crime Squad, Customs, Immigration Service, National High-Tech Crime Unit and Assets Recovery Agency.

police bail. Nobody has yet been charged.

The police are understood to be busy crosschecking the evidence provided in previous interviews as well as the documents obtained. The focus of inquiries continues to be the alleged sale of honours, together with a subsequent cover-up providing related issues of conspiracy and perverting the course of justice.

The question of breaches of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act – where former Labour Party treasurer Matt Carter could be vulnerable over the undisclosed loans from four would-be peers – also remains on the table, although this seems less favoured currently than conspiracy or perverting the course of justice.

The police are expected to recommend prosecutions of certain individuals – not to do so after such a high profile prosecution could provoke a firestorm of protest from the Dear Leader downwards. But the ultimate decision will be made by top CPS official Carmen Dowd with the assistance of leading QC David Perry.

That decision is likely to be influenced not just by the evidence but also the public interest argument. Opinions vary as to the strength of the evidence and whether it would produce a successful prosecution. If it might not then the public interest argument/excuse could well kick in. Either way, it seems unlikely there will be any rush to judgment. So the issue could still be unresolved by the time Tony Blair steps down.

ELSEWHERE in the murky world of overseas corruption, there is growing speculation that Russian aluminium czar Oleg Deripaska may be looking for a deal to settle an embarrassing High Court case revolving round how RUSAL came to control a lucrative contract with a smelter in Tajikistan.

Businessman Avaz Nazarov and his London-based offshore company Ansol have sued RUSAL, claiming they were squeezed out of a joint venture with Deripaska over a contract with the government-controlled Tajik aluminium company, TADAZ. The Tajiks, in turn, have sued Nazarov claiming that he obtained the contract to supply TADAZ with raw materials in return for aluminium by bribing the plant director with a London flat. Everybody denies everything.

Both cases are due to be heard later this year. But to date RUSAL has not had a good experience at the hands of British judges hearing procedural issues in the case. It was criticised for its actions by Mr Justice Blackburne in a ruling in October 2005 and then failed to get Mr Justice Cresswell last September to dismiss the case brought by Nazarov. It did, however, succeed in having the case against Deripaska dropped.

RUSAL and Deripaska have a record for preferring settlements to trials. They settled cases in the US, British Virgin Islands and Swiss courts brought by former business partners. One case that did go to court – over a smelter in Guinea – resulted in defeat for the RUSAL camp in the High Court in 2003.

So with continued talk of a RUSAL float once it completes its merger with SUAL and Glencore, the publicity that might be generated by the Nazarov case could well be worth avoiding. And after all, it is only about money. Neither side would escape undamaged from the dispute being aired in public.

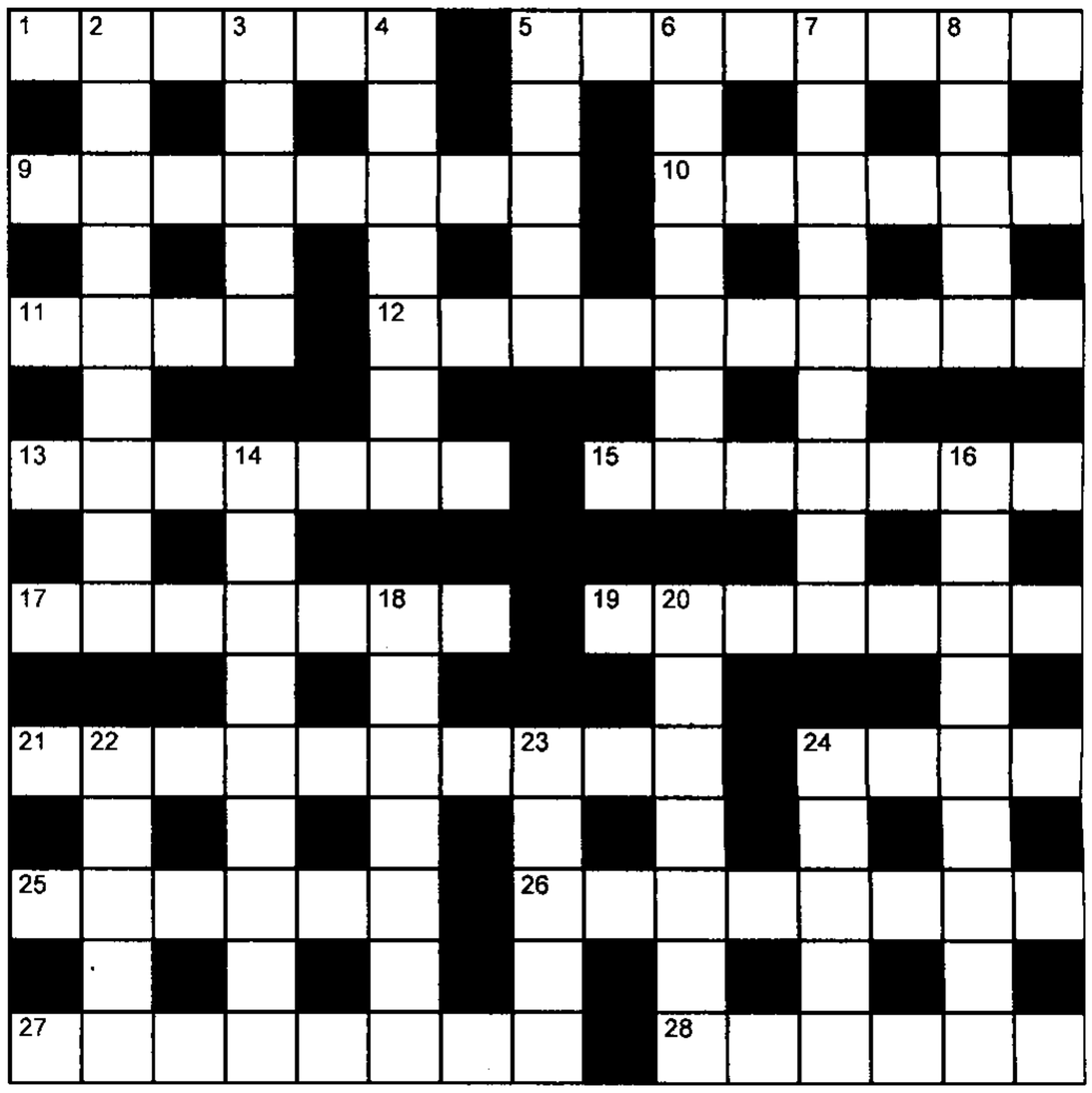
'Slicker'

EYE CROSSWORD 334

by Cyclops

£100 prize to first correct solution opened on 9 March 2007

Entries to 'Crossword', Private Eye, 6 Carlisle Street, London W1D 3BN or via email to crossword@private-eye.co.uk



ACROSS

1 Big noise behind *Private Eye* (6)
5 What prisoner does with Buzz's piping? (8)
9/10 Very apprehensive when evacuating parts of buildings (8,6)
11 Start of interest in lavatory bowl torture (4)
12/26 Roger conventionally adopting this view: "godless foreigners should be converted" (10,8)
13 Somewhat bigoted if I censor an erection? (7)
15 Was sick but not cast down (5,2)
17 Member's cover-up when Tony's off round France (7)
19 "Kinky Spears draped round Democrat's leader" smears (7)
21 Accepting urine sample is derisory? (4-6)
24 Browse for cocaine-free dandruff? (4)
25 A feature of shite channels is electronic wizardry and such (2,4)
26 See 12ac.
27 Ambassador is in Barking, my arse! (8)
28 Castro keen to contain coup (6)

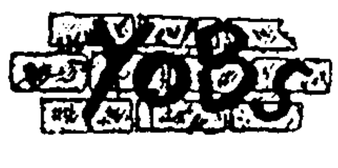
DOWN

2 Strange start to unseemly forehand tossing (7,2)
3 Political leader's a joke, suppressing *Times* and *Independent* leaders (5)
4 Like an earth-moving experience? One needs S and M on one in short time (7)
5 Dummy Dubya not hot about uprising attempt (5)
6 "Refuse Bush?" Blair snapped (Al backed out) (7)
7 Customers etc. screwed with Nellie (9)
8 Excess of wine right for cheap flight specialist? (5)
14 French supporters – they won't go down well with typical Brits? (5,4)
16 Labour less than is required! (9)
18 Extra, cheating, uses air-tube (7)
20 Hack able to fly with Margaret since getting Bush's heart (7)
22 Cyclops is cuddling girl with round figure, in a manner of speaking (5)
23 In the way of an impotent member, head off for state, indirectly (5)
24 Lecher screwed stray (5)

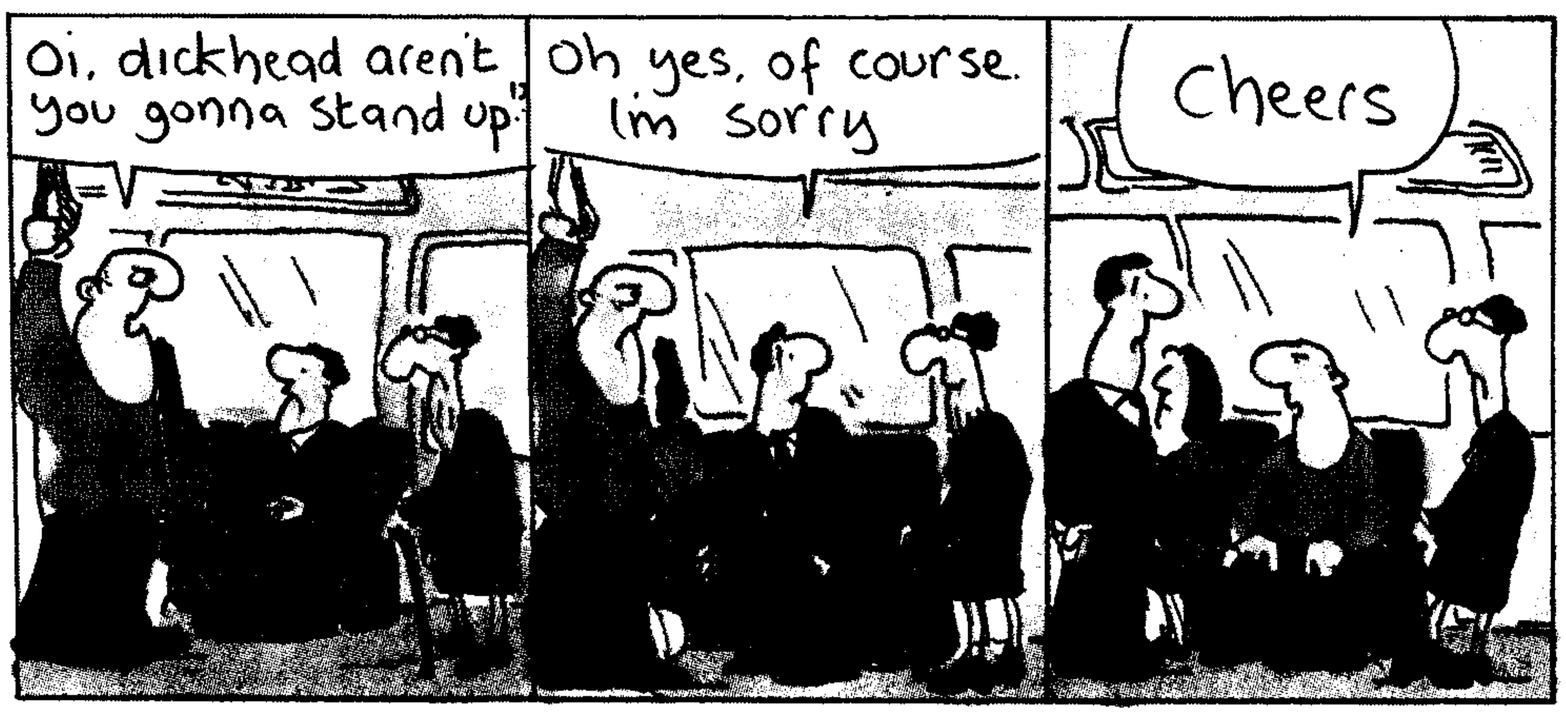
Crossword 333 winner: TIM LOTON

ACROSS: 1 Oppressor 6 Oats 9 Garlic 10 Fellatio 12/4 Surveillance society 14 Cats eye 16 Syringe 17 Lechery 9 Stomach 21 Constipation 25 Cockeyed 26 Talker 27 Bull 28 Excrement.

DOWN: 2 Pear-shaped 3 Ruler 5 Offal 7 Anarchism 8 Shit 11 Leaky 13 Age Concern 15 Schnorkel 18 Rusty 20 Traitor 22 Index 23 Islam 24 Boob.



HUSBAND



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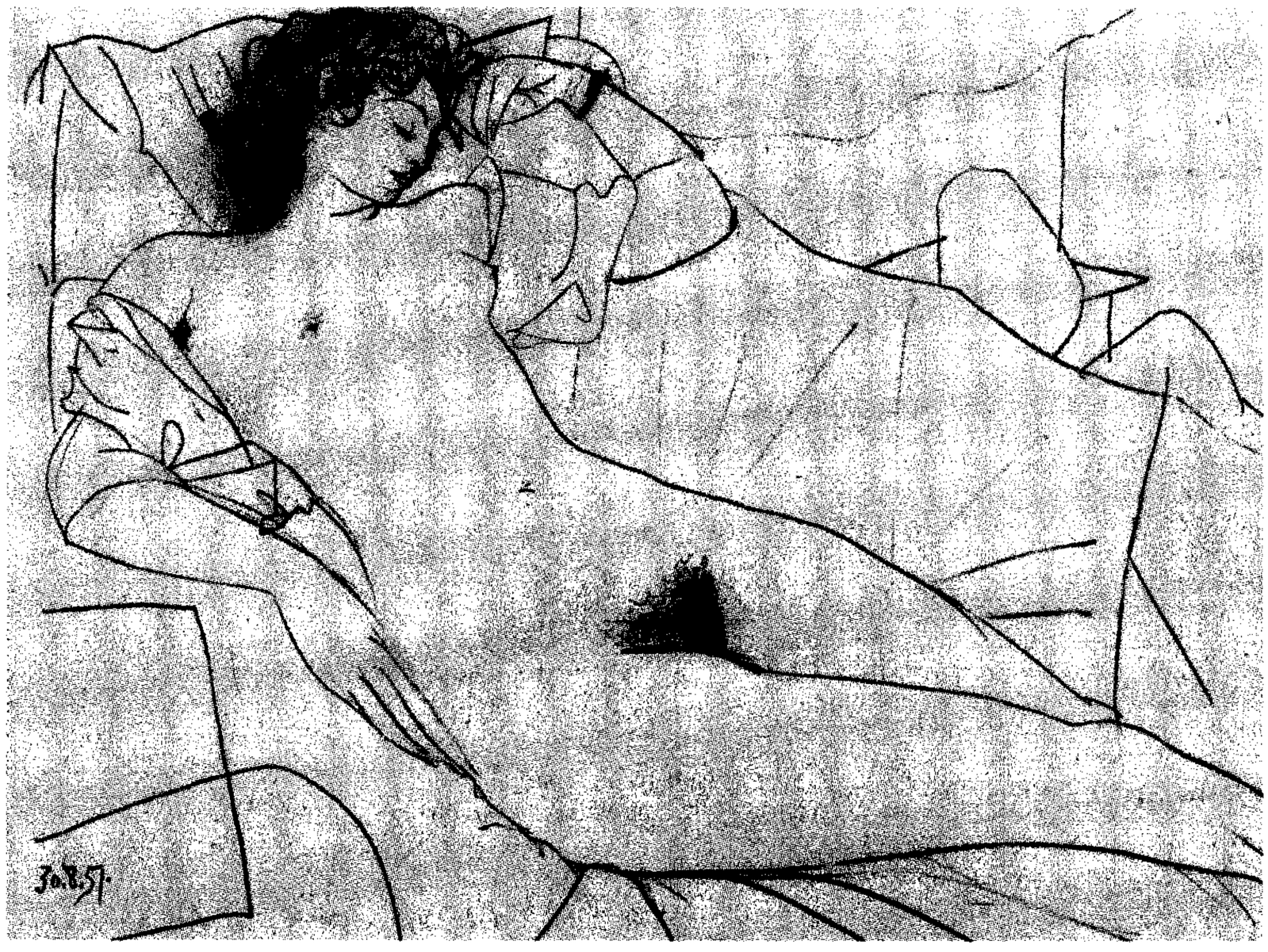
Geneviève Laporte first met Picasso in Paris in 1944, to interview him for a university magazine about the outcry provoked by his exhibition at the Salon d'Automne.

In reply to her first question, "Monsieur Picasso, young people don't understand your painting!" Picasso exploded: "Since when do you have to explain the language of painting? It's not meant to explain anything... but to foster emotion within the soul of the viewer. No work of art should leave people indifferent... they should be moved... The viewer must be dragged from his torpor – shaken and grabbed by the throat!"

The impertinent Geneviève Laporte became a regular visitor to Picasso's studio before leaving for England and the United States and did not see Picasso again for several years. They met again in 1951 and spent the summer together at St. Tropez, where they became lovers. It was here that Picasso made many drawings of Geneviève none more beautiful or intimate than L'Odalisque.



L'Odalisque: Portrait of Geneviève Laporte
30th August 1951 (pencil and charcoal drawing). Print size 21 x 17½ inches. Framed size: 24 x 20½ inches.
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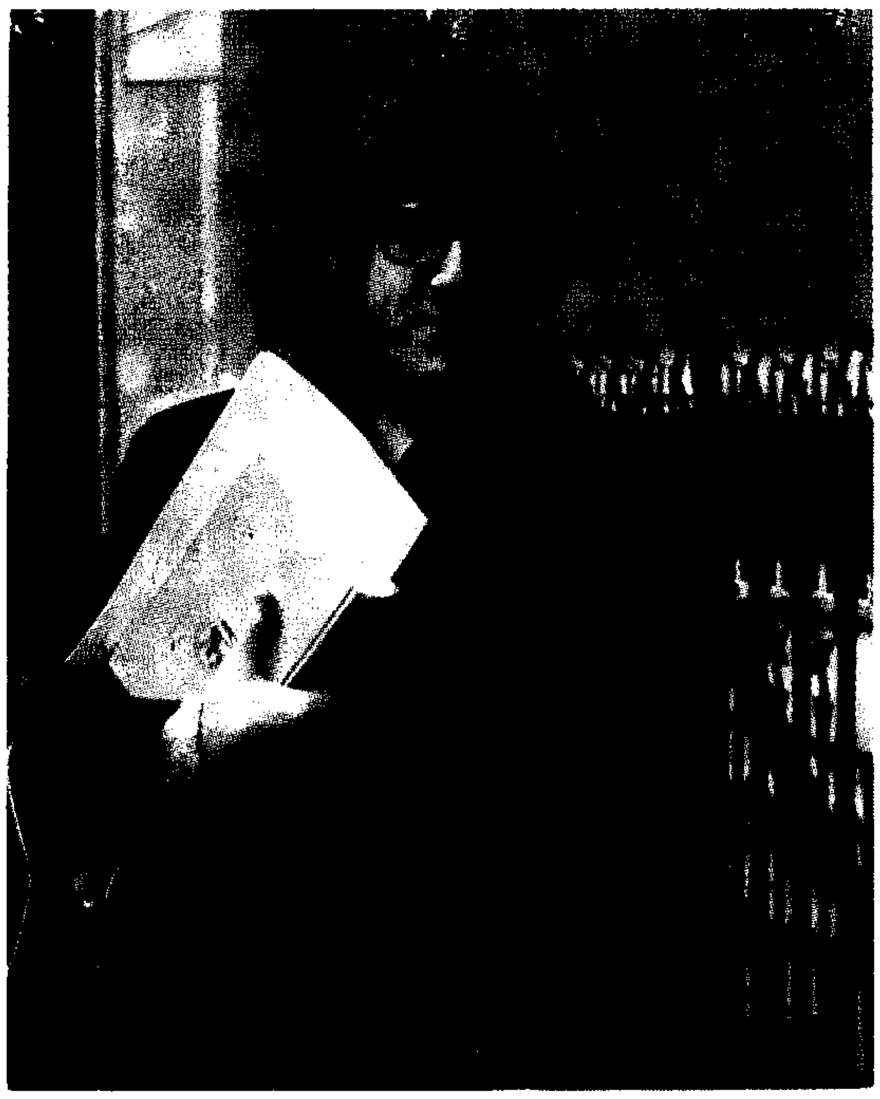

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A suitable man to spark a men's clothing revolution

Consider this proposition. Would you rather pay the same sum for a single, off-the-peg, chain store suit cut by a computer and sold to you by a spotty boy who thinks side vents are to be found on a Lambretta scooter, or for two bespoke, custom cut, hand-stitched suits, measured and sold to you by a man for whom suits are a lifetime's passion?

The British clothing chain store has a lot to fear from ***Mr. Raja M Daswani*** of Kowloon. If there were a global ambassador for men's suiting, Mr Daswani, who owns and runs Hong Kong's biggest tailoring business, would be that man. He and his family team measure and make hundreds of suits a week for discerning clients across the world.

Indeed, so successful is ***Mr. Daswani***, that – a little unnervingly as he is measuring you up – he freely admits he doesn't really need to work any more: 'My team is as experienced as I am. But I just love men's suits and I wouldn't feel right sitting at home. It's not a business. It's a mission.

'I love seeing customers walk in a really bad suit that cost them a fortune and walk out in one of our suits that's perfect in every way, made with a good heart in a superior fabric for a half or a quarter as much.'

The price of a Daswani shirt and suit are astonishing. We are talking from £19 (£25 including tax and duty) for a custom shirt and £129 (£169 including tax and duty) for a fully lined, made-to measure suit in a lightweight wool or linen, to £250 (£325 including tax and duty) for a 100 per cent wool, entirely hand finished suit in a British cloth, with every refinement from handmade button holes to knee lining. Even the most expensive suit, made in deluxe superfine wool for £1,500 (£1,950 including tax and duty), costs a third less than it would on **Savile Row.**

Raja Daswani may be based in Hong Kong, but his sartorial mission to the badly dressed and overpaying British customer brings him to the UK as often as once a month. He and his team take over hotel suites in major cities, so British customers can make an appointment and get the full Kowloon Monty.

Measurements and digital photos are taken here and emailed to Hong Kong. Often, your suit will be started on by a tailor 6,000 miles away before you've even left the hotel. You can have it couriered within a week or so, or wait for a second fitting when the Raja team hits your town again a few weeks later.

It now remains to see whether the Raja revolution, with its inspired mix of artistic flair, entrepreneurial genius and digital technology, will see the end of the off-the-peg British chain store suit. On price alone, it's a sartorial solution that will even please the Suits in accounts.

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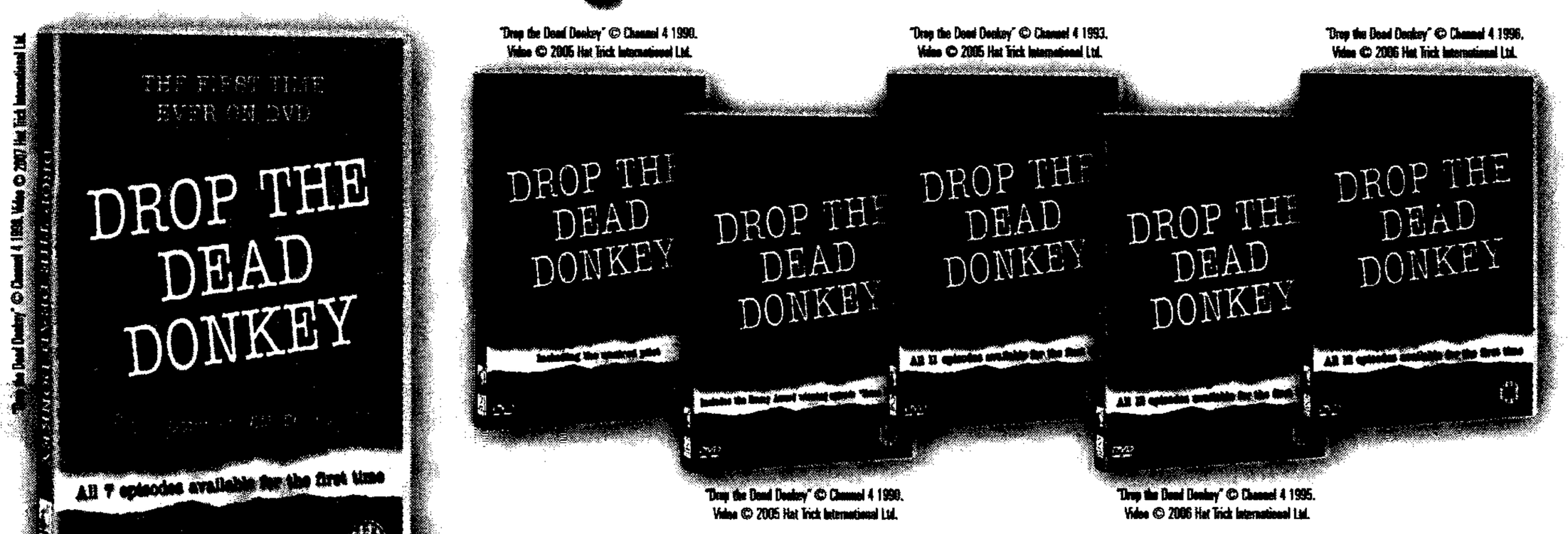
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SURGERY COMPLICATION caused 90% nasal breathing loss, deformed, collapsed nose / sinuses. Please help me breathe again. Every pound helps. Natalia, S/C: 07-44-56. A/C: 04010171. yours02@hotmail.com

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LAZY BASTARD seeks money. S/C: 12-60-53. A/C: 07018141. Aspar22@hotmail.com

RECENTLY GRADUATED ACTOR requires patron to avoid spiralling into debt. Will pay forward when circumstances allow. S/C: 09-01-26. A/C: 06206704.

EX EMPTIED ACCOUNT: Dreams of my Harley shattered. All help hugely appreciated. HSBC, S/C: 40-33-01. A/C: 32494256. ladylovesbikes@yahoo.co.uk

VICTIM OF HOSPITAL BUG faces losing home. Needs 20K. Please help. S/C: 60-22-16. A/C: 39347052.

SEEKING HELP WHILE RECOVERING from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; any amount welcome. S/C: 07-01-16. A/C: 40166940.

A SINGLE MOTHER OF TWO KIDS – the first five years' old – the second just eight months: Desperately seeking financial help; might lose home soon – please, please help. S/C: 30-90-80. A/C: 10766468. £10K needed.

HARDWORKING, DISILLUSIONED gay orphan needs lucky financial break to rescue others. LloydsTSB, S/C: 30-92-90. A/C: 00947448.

MAJOR PATRON SOUGHT for professional theatre production, London – tickletheatre@hotmail.com £9,000. S/C: 40-02-32. A/C: 01442732.

NUTRITION STUDENT working on relieving arthritis but need funds to continue for three years! S/C: 40-47-73. A/C: 42818566.

UNCOMPROMISING POET songwriter musician requires backer to launch independent label. Melodic blues jazz country fusion, hard-hitting lyrics. rolg1@btinternet.com

SCARED AND IN A MESS: £40,000 debt, parents both terminally ill. S/C: 20-81-20. A/C: 00319651.

GIRLS' BASKETBALL CLUB urgently needs funding as it is deep in debt. Yorkshire Bank. S/C: 05-04-65. A/C: 47324137. Please help.

MAYDAY... Slowly sinking – bailing ineffectually – drowning imminent – 60,000 lifebelts needed... ANY gratefully received. S/C: 55-81-20. A/C: 12336637.

PLEASE HELP SINGLE MOTHER: Can't pay student fees, nursery and big debts. S/C: 60-05-34. A/C: 56127278.

8K IN DEBT: Bailiffs coming soon. Can anyone please help? Thanks. S/C: 30-93-48. A/C: 16203560.

ENTERPRISING COUPLE, she former model, have exciting and viable business need funds; more details from Julie and Rob. Reply Box 193252.

MONEY DESPERATELY NEEDED to escape bad, abusive situation. Save me. Please. HBOS (Halifax) S/C: 80-05-14. A/C: 07006870. Thanks.

COVERT CAMERA SPECIALIST needs donations, 50p to £5K, to help demonstrate injustices. HSBC, S/C: 40-18-17. A/C: 32854864. Thank you.

ASPERGER SYNDROME BOY, 10: In legal process to secure funding from LEA for son, with AS and ADHD, for a place offered by specialist school to enable him to reach his potential. Costs exceed budget of £15,000. Need further £10,000. S/C: 20-29-90. A/C: 40159778. Any help would be greatly appreciated.

DEAR BOB DYLAN, do a song about me? Eye Need Princess Beatrice 24/7. Tickets to CU Sheffield, Newcastle, April 2007. David Miedzianik. rainmanhall&lvjah@hotmail.com

PLEASE HELP, young student desperately needs £1500. S/C: 77-95-21. A/C: 85677560.

SEVERELY DEPRESSED: I need 25K to cover debt with bank. Please help. S/C: 20-65-20. A/C: 80283355.

THEATRE COMPANY SEEKS INVESTMENT for cutting edge political satire, April / May 2007: Contact Paul Morris at paulmorris65@msn.com

EXTRAORDINARILY TALENTED lyricist / songwriter needs £3000 to record professional demo. Email ruthiepz@hotmail.com to hear songs. S/C: 11-16-24. A/C: 06517491.

ABUSED PARAPLEGIC HOMELESS nursing student living in hovel: Please help with cost of speculative magazine ad. S/C: 07-01-16. A/C: 20051263.

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FIT BLOKE, 40, wants free accommodation / simple work in Europe. Tel: 07758 639 483. richarmorris@hotmail.co.uk

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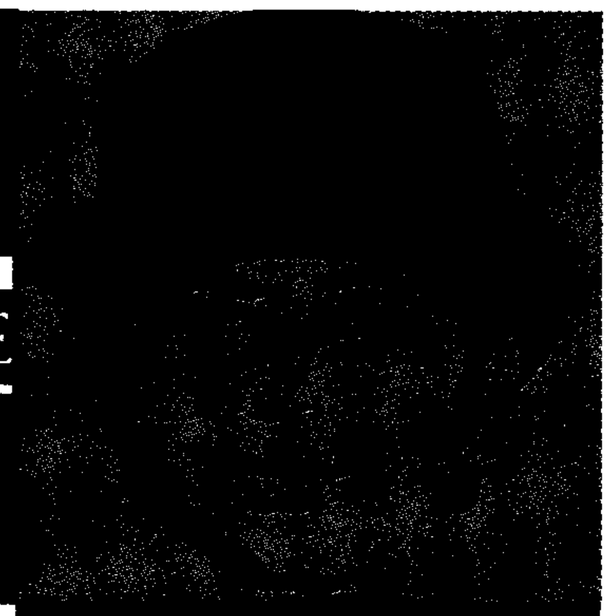

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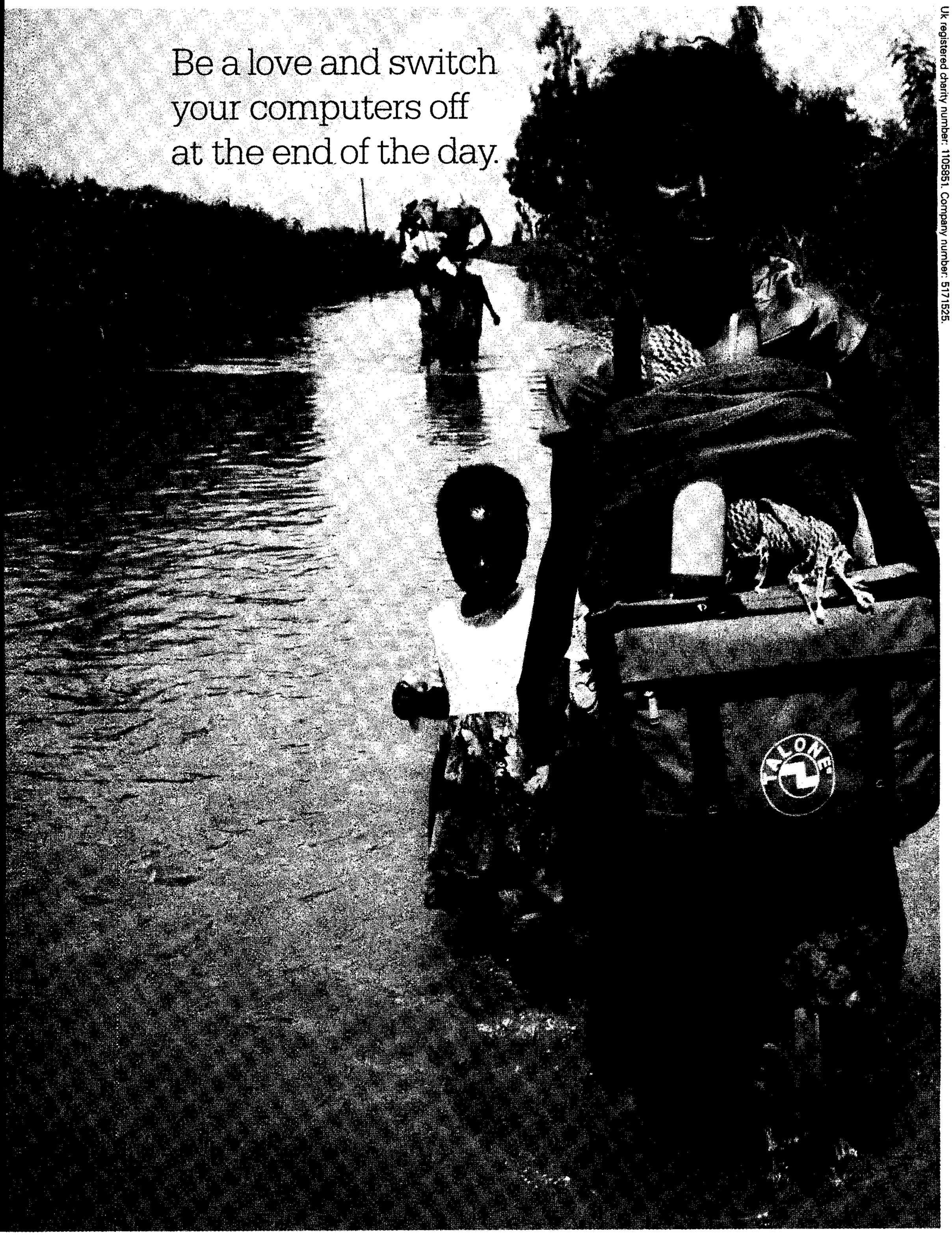

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